

# **GUY DEBORD**



## **SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE (AND MORE)**



**PRINCIPLES, PROPOSITIONS &  
DISCUSSIONS  
FOR LAND & FREEDOM**

AN INTRODUCTORY WORD TO THE  
'ANARCHIVE'

**"Anarchy is Order!"**

*I must Create a System or be enslav'd by  
another Man's.*

*I will not Reason & Compare: my business  
is to Create'*

(William Blake)

During the 19th century, anarchism has developed as a result of a social current which aims for freedom and happiness. A number of factors since World War I have made this movement, and its ideas, disappear little by little under the dust of history.

After the classical anarchism - of which the Spanish Revolution was one of the last representatives - a 'new' kind of resistance was founded in the sixties which claimed to be based (at least partly) on this anarchism. However this resistance is often limited to a few (and even then partly misunderstood) slogans such as 'Anarchy is order', 'Property is theft',...

Information about anarchism is often hard to come by, monopolised and intellectual; and therefore visibly disappearing. The 'anarchival' or 'anarchist archive' Anarchy is Order ( in short **A.O**) is an attempt to make the '**principles, propositions and discussions**' of this tradition available again for anyone it concerns. We believe that these texts are part of our own heritage. They don't belong to publishers, institutes or specialists.

These texts thus have to be available for all anarchists and other people interested. That is

one of the conditions to give anarchism a new impulse, to let the 'new anarchism' outgrow the slogans. This is what makes this project relevant for us: we must find our roots to be able to renew ourselves. We have to learn from the mistakes of our socialist past. History has shown that a large number of the anarchist ideas remain standing, even during the most recent social-economic developments.

**'Anarchy Is Order' does not make profits, everything is spread at the price of printing- and papercosts. This of course creates some limitations for these archives. Everyone is invited to spread along the information we give . This can be done by copying our leaflets, printing texts from the CD (collecting all available texts at a given moment) that is available or copying it, e-mailing the texts to friends and new ones to us,... Become your own anarchiv!!!**

(Be aware though of copyright restrictions. We also want to make sure that the anarchist or non-commercial printers, publishers and authors are not being harmed. Our priority on the other hand remains to spread the ideas, not the ownership of them.)

The anarchiv offers these texts hoping that values like **freedom, solidarity and direct action** get a new meaning and will be lived again; so that the struggle continues against the

*"...demons of flesh and blood, that sway  
scepters down here;  
and the dirty microbes that send us dark  
diseases and wish to  
squash us like horseflies;*

*and the will-'o-the-wisp of the saddest  
ignorance."*

(L-P. Boon)

The rest depends as much on you as it depends  
on us. Don't mourn, Organise!

Comments, questions, criticism, cooperation can  
be sent to [A.O@advalvas.be](mailto:A.O@advalvas.be).

A complete list and updates are available on this  
address, new texts are always

WELCOME!!

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# **PREFACE TO THE FOURTH ITALIAN EDITION OF *LA SOCIETE DU SPECTACLE***

**BY GUY DEBORD, JANUARY 1979**

**Trans. Michel Prigent and Lucy Forsyth,  
October 1979**

Translations of this book, which was published in Paris towards the end of 1967, have already appeared in about ten or so countries, and, more often than not, several have been produced in the same language by competing publishers, and nearly always they are bad. The first translations everywhere were unfaithful and incorrect, with the exception of Portugal and possibly Denmark. The translations published in Dutch and German are good in their second versions, even though the German publisher on this occasion neglected to correct a large number of mistakes in the printing. In English and Spanish the third editions had to be awaited in order to know what I had really written. There was nothing worse than the situation in Italy, however, where, as early as 1968, the publisher De Donato put out the most monstrous one of all, which has only been partially improved upon by the two rival translations that followed. Moreover, [Paolo Salvadori](#), having gone to find those responsible for this excess in their offices, had hit them and had even literally



spat in their faces, for such is naturally the way good translators act when they meet bad ones. It suffices to say that the fourth Italian translation, which is by Salvadori, is excellent.

This extreme deficiency of so many translations, which, with the exception of the four or five better ones, were not submitted to me [prior to publication], does not mean that this book should be more difficult to understand than any other that has ever really deserved to be written. Poor treatment is not particularly reserved for subversive works, because in this case the falsifiers at least do not have to fear being taken to court by the author, or because the ineptitude added to the text [by bad translations] will give some small encouragement to the whims of bourgeois or bureaucratic ideologues to refute it. One cannot fail to note that the great majority of translations published in recent years, in whichever country it happens to be -- and even when it is a question of classics -- are contrived in the same manner. Paid intellectual labour normally tends to obey the law of the industrial production of decadence, where the contractor's profit depends on the speed with which the job is carried out and on the bad quality of the material used. This production -- so proudly freed from all appearance of contrivance of the public's taste, since, being concentrated financially and thus always better equipped

technologically, it holds a monopoly over the entire space of the market with the non-qualitative presence of supply -- has managed to speculate with an increasing boldness on the forced submission of demand, and on the loss of taste, which is temporarily its consequence in the mass of its customers. Whether it is a matter of housing, the meat of a reared ox, or the fruit of the ignorant spirit of a bad translator, the consideration of sovereign importance is that one can now obtain very quickly (and for less cost) that which, before, demanded rather long hours of qualified work. It is true enough, on the other hand, that translators have little reason to pour over the meaning of a book, and above all to learn the language in question beforehand, when nearly all the current authors who publish have written books in such evident haste that they will be out of date in a very short time. What is the point of translating well something that has already uselessly written and which will not ultimately be read? It is in this aspect of its special harmony that the spectacular system is perfect, though it fails to pieces in other aspects.

Yet this current practice of most publishers is ill-adapted in the case of *The Society of the Spectacle*, which interests quite another public, for another use. Various kinds of books exist in a clearly more distinct way than before. Many are not even opened; few are copied on to walls. These latter derive

their popularity and their power of conviction precisely from the fact that the despised representatives of the spectacle do not speak of them, or only mention them in passing a few commonplace remarks about them. Individuals who will have to stake their lives, beginning from a certain description of historical forces and their use, of course have the wish to examine the documents for themselves and in rigorously exact translations. Undoubtedly, in the current conditions of the overmultiplied production and the overconcentrated distribution of books, the vast majority of the titles are successful or, more often, unsuccessful for the first few weeks after their publication. The ungraded products of current-day publishing bases its policy of hasty arbitrariness and *fait accompli* on this, which is suitable enough for those books that will be spoken about, probably any old way and only once. This privilege is denied to it here, and it is altogether futile to translate my book in a slap-dash manner, since the task will always be started over again by others, and bad translations will be unceasingly supplanted by better ones.

A French journalist who had recently worded a thick volume, which was proclaimed appropriate for renewing the entire debate of ideas, attributed his failure a few months later to the fact that he lacked readers rather than ideas. He then declared that we are in a society where no one reads,

and that if Marx were to publish *Capital* nowadays, he would appear one evening on a literary television programme, explaining his intentions, and the next day it would no longer be spoken about. This ludicrous errors stinks of the milieu from which it originates. Obviously, if nowadays anyone were to publish a veritable book of social critique, they would absolutely abstain from appearing on television, and from other colloquies of the same kind as well, so that ten or even twenty years later it would still be spoken about.

As a matter of fact, I believe that there is nobody in the world capable of being interested in my book apart from those who are enemies of the existing social order and who act efficaciously, starting from this position. My certainty in this respect, well-founded in theory, is confirmed by the empirical observation of the rare and poverty-stricken critiques or allusions to which it has given rise amongst those who hold, or who are still only striving to acquire, the authority to speak publicly in the spectacle, in front of people who remain silent. These varied specialists of the semblance of discussions, which are still abusively called "cultural" or "political," have necessarily aligned their logic and their culture with that of the system that can employ them -- not only because they have been selected by it, but, above all, because they have never been educated by anything

else. Of all those who have quoted from this book in order to acknowledge some importance in it, I have not seen one up till now who took the risk to say, even briefly, what it was about: in fact, it was their concern simply to give the impression that they were not unaware of it. At the same time, all those who have found a fault in it seem not to have found any others, as they said nothing else about it. But each time, this exact fault has something that sufficed to satisfy its discoverer. One faulted this book for not tackling the problem of the State; another thought it took no account of the existence of history; another rejected it as an irrational and incommunicable eulogy of pure destruction; another condemned it as being the secret guide of all the governments constituted since its publication. Fifty others immediately reached so many peculiar conclusions in the same sleep of reason. And whether they wrote in periodicals, books or pamphlets composed *ad hoc*, the same tone of capricious impotence was used by all, for lack of something better, no doubt. On the other hand, to my knowledge it is in the factories of Italy that this book has found for the moment its best readers. The workers of Italy -- who can be held up as an example to their comrades in all countries for their absenteeism, their wildcat strikes that no particular concession can manage to appease, their lucid refusal of work, and their contempt for the law and for all Statist

parties -- know the subject well enough by practice to have been able to benefit from the theses of *The Society of the Spectacle*, even when they read nothing but mediocre translations of them.

Most often the commentators pretended not to understand to what usage a book can be destined if it will never be able to be classified into any of the categories of the intellectual productions that the dominant society wants to take into consideration, and if it was not written from the point of view of any of the specialized trades that it encourages. Thus, the intentions of the author seemed obscure. However, there is nothing mysterious about them. Clausewitz remarked in *The 1815 French Campaign*: "The essential of all strategic critique is to place oneself exactly at the standpoint of the actors; it is true that this is often quite difficult to do. The great majority of strategic critiques would disappear completely or would be reduced to very slight distinctions of comprehension if writers would or could place themselves, in thought, in all the circumstances in which the actors found themselves."

In 1967 I wanted the Situationist International to have a book of theory. The SI was at this time the extremist group that had done the most to bring back revolutionary contestation to modern society; and it was easy to see that this

group, having imposed its victory on the terrain of critical theory, and having skillfully followed through on the terrain of practical agitation, was then drawing near the culminating point of its historical action. So it was a question of such a book being present in the troubles that were soon to come and that would pass it on after them to the vast subversive sequel that these troubles could not fail to open up.

One knows of the strong tendency of men [sic] to uselessly repeat simplified fragments of the old revolutionary theories whose wear and tear remains hidden from them by the simple fact that they do not try to apply them in any effective struggle to transform the conditions in which they really find themselves; in this way, they scarcely understand any better how these theories have been able, with varying fortunes, to be brought into action in the conflicts of other days. In spite of this, there is no doubt for anyone who examines the question coldly that those who really want to shake an established society must formulate a theory that fundamentally explains it, or which at least seems to give a satisfactory explanation of it. As soon as this theory has been divulged a little (even before it comes to be exactly understood) -- provided that the work of dissemination is done in confrontations that disturb the public peace -- the discontent felt everywhere will be heightened and made more bitter by the sole

faint knowledge of the existence of a theoretical condemnation of the order of things. And after that, it is by beginning to conduct angrily the war for freedom that all proletarians can become strategists.

Undoubtedly, a general theory calculated for this end must first avoid appearing visibly false, and so must not expose itself to the risk of being contradicted later on by the outcome of events. But it must also be a completely unacceptable theory. To the indignant stupefaction of all those who find the very centre of the existing world to be good, it must be able to denounce the centre as bad, precisely because it has exposed the existing world's exact nature. The theory of the spectacle meets these two requirements.

The foremost merit of an exact critical theory is to make all the others seem ridiculous instantaneously. So, in 1968 -- while not one of the other organized currents (which, in the movement of negation in and through which the degeneration of the current forms of domination began, came to defend their own backwardness and their limited ambitions) had in their possession a book of modern theory, nor even recognized anything new in the class power that they wished to overthrow -- situationists were capable of putting forward the sole theory of the redoubtable revolt of May [1968], and were the only ones who took account of the new



blazing grievances that no one had uttered. Who weeps for the consensus? We have killed it. *Cosa fatta capo ha*.

Fifteen years previously, in 1952, four or five scarcely recommendable people from Paris decided to search for the supersession of art. It appeared then, by a fortunate consequence of a daring advance on this path, that the old defense lines that had smashed the previous offenses of the social revolution found themselves outflanked and overturned. The chance to launch another offensive was then discovered. This supersession of art is the "North West Passage" of the geography of real life that had so often been sought for more than a century, beginning especially with auto-destructive modern poetry. The previous attempts, where so many exploiters had got lost, had never directly emerged onto such a perspective. This is probably because there still remained something in the old artistic realm for them to ravage and, above all, because the flag of revolution seemed to be brandished previously by other, more expert hands. But moreover, never had this cause undergone such a complete rout, and never had the battlefield been left so empty, than at that moment when we came to array ourselves on it. I think that the recalling of these circumstances is the best elucidation that can be brought to bear on the ideas and the style of *The Society of the Spectacle*. If anyone wants to read this book, they will

gather that I neither slept away nor squandered the 15 years that I spent meditating on the downfall of the State.

There is not a word to be changed in this book in which, apart from three or four typographic mistakes, nothing has been corrected in the course of the dozen or so reprints it has known in France. I flatter myself to be a very rare contemporary example of someone who has written without immediately being contradicted by the event, and I do not mean contradicted a hundred or a thousand times like the others, but not once. I have no doubt that the confirmation all my theses encounter ought not to last right until the end of the century and even beyond. The reason for this is simple: I have understood the constituent factors of the spectacle "in the course of the movement and consequently by their ephemeral aspect," that is to say, by envisaging the whole of the historical movement that has been able to edify this order, and which is now beginning to dissolve it. On this scale, the eleven years that have gone by since 1967, and whose conflicts I have been able to know fairly closely, have been but a moment in the necessary consequence of what had been written; although, in the spectacle itself, these years have been filled by the appearance and replacement of six or seven generations of thinkers, each more definitive than the others. During this time, the

spectacle has done nothing but meet more exactly its concept, and the real movement of its negation has done nothing but spread itself extensively and intensively.

In fact, it fell on spectacular society itself to add something of which this book, I think, had no need: heavier and more convincing proofs and examples. We have been able to see the falsification, like a sticky fog that accumulates at the ground level of everyday existence, thicken and descend down to the fabrication of the most trivial things. We have been able to see the technical and police control of men and of the natural forces aspire to the absolute, and even up to "telematic" madness, while its mistakes are growing just as quickly as its means. We have been able to see the State lie develop in itself and for itself, having so well forgotten its conflictual link with truth and plausibility that it can forget and replace itself from hour to hour. Around the time of the kidnapping and execution of Aldo Moro, Italy had the opportunity to contemplate this technique at the highest degree it has ever reached, and which, however, will soon be surpassed, here or elsewhere. The Italian authorities' version of this event, aggravated rather than ameliorated by a hundred successive alterations, and which all commentators made it their duty to acknowledge in public, was not credible for a single instant. Its intention was not to be believed, but to be the only one in the shop

window, and, afterwards, to be forgotten exactly like a bad book.

The kidnapping and execution of Aldo Moro was a mythological opera with great machinations, where terrorist heroes are, by turns, foxes so as to ensnare their prey, lions so as to fear nobody as long as they retain it, and stool-pigeons so as not to draw from this coup d'etat anything harmful to the regime they aspire to defy. We are told they [the Red Brigades] have the luck of having to deal with the most incapable of police, and that, besides, they were capable of infiltrating its highest spheres without hindrance. This explanation is hardly dialectical. A seditious organization that would put certain of its members in contact with the security services of the State -- unless it had them worm their way into it a number of years previously, in order for them to loyally undertake their task when a great opportunity arises for them to make use of -- should expect that its manipulators would be in turn sometimes manipulated, and would be thus deprived of this Olympian assurance of impunity that characterizes the Chief of Staff of the "red brigade." But the Italian State has something better to say, with the unanimous approval of those who support it. Like any other State, it has thought of infiltrating agents of its special services into the clandestine terrorist networks, where it is so easy for them to ensure for themselves a rapid career track

up to leadership positions, from which they bring about the fall of their superiors -- as did Malinowski, the man who deceived even the cunning Lenin on behalf of the Czarist Okhrana, and Azez, who, once at the head of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party's "combat organization," carried this mastery to the point of instigating the assassination of Stolypin, the Prime Minister. One single unfortunate coincidence came to interfere with the goodwill of the State: its special services had just been dissolved. Up to now, a secret service had never been dissolved like, for example, the lading of a giant oil tanker in some coastal waters, or a fraction of the modern industrial production in Seveso. While keeping its archives, its informers and its practicing officers, the secret service simply changed its name. It is thus that in Italy, the S.I.M. (Military Intelligence Service of the fascist regime, so well known for its sabotages and its assassinations abroad) became the S.I.D. (the Defense Intelligence Service under the Christian-Democratic regime. Moreover, when a kind of robot-doctrine of the "red brigade" -- a gloomy caricature of what one would be presumed to think and carry out if one were to advocate the disappearance of the State -- had been programmed on a computer, a slip of which (how true it is that these machines depend on the unconscious of those who feed data into them!) has caused these same initials -- S.I.M., as in the "International Society of Multinationals" -- to

be attributed to the only pseudo-concept that the "red brigade" repeats automatically. This S.I.D., "steeped in Italian blood," had to be dissolved recently because, as the State acknowledges *post festum*, it was the organization that since 1969 had carried out directly, most often but not always with bombs, this long series of massacres that were imputed (according to the time of year) to anarchists, neo-fascists or situationists. Now that the "red brigade" does exactly this same work, and, for once, with a distinctly superior operational value, the S.I.D. cannot combat it, since it has been dissolved. In any secret service worthy of the name, even its dissolution would be secret. Hence one cannot distinguish what proportion of units in the S.I.D. was permitted an honorable retirement, what other proportion was assigned to the "red brigade" or perhaps lent to the Shah of Iran to burn down a cinema in Abadan, and what other proportion was discreetly exterminated by a State probably indignant to learn that sometimes its instructions have been exceeded, a State one knows that will never hesitate to kill the sons of Brutus in order to make its laws respected, since its intransigent refusal to envisage even the most minimal concession to save Moro has proved at last that it had all the staunch virtues of republican Rome.

Giorgio Bocca -- who is considered the best analyst of the Italian press, and who was in

1975 the first dupe of Censor's [Veridical Report](#), immediately dragging along with him the entire nation, or at least the qualified strata that writes in newspapers -- has not been discouraged from the profession by this awkward demonstration of his foolishness. And maybe it's a blessing for him that it was then proved by such scientific experimentation, because, if not, one could have been fully assured that it was either out of venality or fear that in May 1978 he wrote his book *Moro, Una tragedia italiana*, in which he hastens to swallow, without missing one, the mystifications in circulation, and spews them up again on the spot, declaring that they are excellent. For one single moment he is brought to recall the center of the question, but of course upside-down, when he writes that:

Today things have changed; with the red terror behind them, the extremist working class fringes can oppose, or attempt to oppose, trade union politics. Anyone who was at an assembly of workers in a factory like Alfa Romeo of Arese could have seen that the group of extremists, which comprises no more than a hundred individuals, is nevertheless capable of placing itself in the front row and of shouting accusations and insults

that the Communist Party must bear.

Nothing is more normal than for revolutionary workers to insult Stalinists, thus gaining the support of nearly all their comrades, since they want to make a revolution. Do they not know, having been taught by their long experience, that the preliminary step is to expel Stalinists from meetings? Not being able to do this is why the revolution failed in 1968 in France and in 1975 in Portugal. What is senseless and odious is to pretend that these "extremist working class fringes" can reach this necessary stage because they have terrorists "behind them." Quite to the contrary, it is because a large number of Italian workers have escaped being enrolled by the Stalinist trade union police that the "red brigade," whose illogical and blind terrorism could only embarrass them, was set in motion, and that the *mass media* seized the opportunity to recognize in the "brigade" their advanced detachment of troops and their disquieting leaders beyond the shadow of a doubt. Bocca insinuates that Stalinists are compelled to put up with the insults that they have so richly deserved everywhere for the past sixty years, because if they did not, they would be physically threatened by terrorists that working class autonomy would hold in reserve. This is nothing but a particularly foul *boccasserie*, since everybody knows that at that time and long



afterwards, the "red brigade" took great care not to attack Stalinists personally. Although they want to give this appearance, it is not according to chance that the "red brigade" chooses its periods of activity, nor out of its own inclinations, its victims. In such a climate as this, we inevitably note the broadening of a peripheral layer of sincere small-time terrorism that is more or less watched over and temporarily tolerated, like a fish tank in which some culprits can always be fished out in order to be displayed on a platter, but the "striking force" of the central interventions could only have been comprised of professionals, which corroborates every detail of their style.

Italian capitalism, and its governmental personnel along with it, is very divided on the really vital and eminently uncertain question of the utilization of Stalinists. Certain modern sectors of big private capital are, or have been, resolutely in favor of utilizing Stalinists; other sectors, which many managers of semi-statist entrepreneurial capital support, are more hostile. High State personnel enjoy a wide autonomy of manoeuvre, because the decisions of the captain override those of the ship-owner when the boat is sinking. But these personnel are themselves divided on this question. The future of each clan depends on the way in which they will know how to impose their reasons, by proving them in practice. Moro believed in the

"historic compromise," that is to say, in the capacity of the Stalinists to finally smash the movement of revolutionary workers. Another tendency, which is for the moment in the position of giving orders to the "red brigade" supervisors, did not believe in it, or at least believed that the Stalinists -- for the feeble services they could render, and which they will render anyway -- are not to be handled exaggeratedly with kid gloves, and that they must be given the stick more harshly, so that they do not become too insolent. It has been seen that this analysis was not without its worth: given that Moro was kidnapped as an inaugural affront to the "historic compromise" that was finally legalized by act of Parliament, the Stalinist party has continued to make a show of believing in the independence of the "red brigade." The prisoner [Moro] was kept alive as long as it was thought possible to prolong the humiliation and embarrassment of friends, who were to suffer the blackmail by nobly feigning not to understand what the unknown barbarians expected of them. For all that, this was brought to a close as soon as the Stalinists bared their teeth, alluding publicly to obscure manoeuvres, and Moro died deceived. In fact, the "red brigade" has another function of a more general interest, which is to disconcert or discredit proletarians who really rise up against the State, and maybe one day to eliminate some of the most dangerous of them. The Stalinists approve of this function because it

helps them in their heavy task. They limit the excesses of the side that proves injurious to them with veiled insinuations in public at crucial moments, and by precise and howled threats in their constant and intimate negotiations with State power. Their weapon of dissuasion is that they could, all of a sudden, tell everything they know about the "red brigade" from the beginning. But no one is ignorant of the facts that they cannot use this weapon without smashing the "historic compromise" and that they thus sincerely wish to be able to remain as discreet about this matter as about the exploits of the rightly so-called S.I.D. in its time. What would become of the Stalinists in a revolution? So they get jostled a bit, but not too much. Ten months after Moro's kidnapping, when the same invincible "red brigade" -- for the first time -- laid low a Stalinist trade unionist, the so-called Communist Party reacted immediately, but only on the terrain of protocol, namely, by threatening its allies in order to compel them to designate it henceforth as a party that is certainly always loyal and constructive, but which will soon be *on the side* of the majority, and no longer a side *in* the majority.

The keg always smells of herring, and a Stalinist will always be in his [sic] element wherever one detects the stink of occult state crime. Why should the Stalinists be so vexed by the atmosphere of the discussions

at the top of the Italian State, when they have a knife up their sleeves and a bomb under the table? Was it not in the same style that the disputes were settled between, for example, Krushchev and Beria, Kadar and Nagy, Mao and Lin Piao? Besides, the leaders of Italian Stalinism were themselves butchers in their youth, at the time of the first "historic compromise," when they -- at the service of the democratic republic of Spain and with the other employees of the "Komintern" -- undertook the counter-revolution of 1937. It was then that their own "red brigades" kidnapped Andres Nin and killed him in a clandestine prison.

Of these sad facts many Italians have been aware, and many more straight away took them into account. But they have never been published anywhere, because the latter have been deprived of the means of doing it and the former of the wish to do so. But it is at this stage of the analysis that one is well-founded in calling to mind a "spectacular" politics of terrorism, and not the "fact," repeated vulgarly with subaltern finesse by so many journalists and professors, that terrorists are sometimes prompted by the desire to make themselves spoken about. Italy sums up the social contradictions of the entire world and attempts, in ways well known to us, to amalgamate in one country the repressive Holy Alliance between class power -- bourgeois and bureaucratic-totalitarian -- that already openly functions

over the surface of the entire earth, in the economic and police solidarity of all States, although, in this too, not without some discussions and settling of accounts in the Italian manner. Being for the moment the most advanced country in the slide towards proletarian revolution, Italy is also the most modern laboratory for international counter-revolution. The other governments born of the old pre-spectacular bourgeois democracy look with admiration at the Italian State for the impassiveness that it manages to maintain, thought it is at the center of all degradations, and for the tranquil dignity with which it wallows in the mud. These are lessons that they will have to apply in their respective home countries for a long time to come.

In fact, governments and the numerous subordinate powers that second them tend to become more modest everywhere. They already content themselves with making their funambolic and terrified management of a process that becomes unceasingly stranger and that they despair of mastering look like a peaceful and routine disposal of current affairs. And like them, on the wind of time, the spectacular commodity has been brought to an astonishing reversal of its type of lying justifications. It used to present as extraordinary -- as the key to a superior and perhaps even elitist existence -- goods that are quite normal and commonplace: a car, some shoes, a PhD in sociology. Today, the

spectacle is compelled to present as normal and familiar things that have become quite extraordinary. Is this bread? wine? a tomato? an egg? a house? a town? The answer to all these questions in "surely not," since a sequence of internal transformations -- economically useful in the short-term to those who control the means of production -- has managed to retain the name and a good part of the appearance of these things, and yet has withheld the taste and the content from them. However, one is assured that the various consumable goods indisputably answer to their traditional names, and the fact that nothing else exists is offered as proof, and thus there is no longer any possible comparison. In the same way that very few people know where to find the genuine in the places where they still exist, the false can legally replace the name of the true, which has meanwhile died out. And the same principle that governs food and people's habitats reaches everywhere, to books and to the latest appearance of democratic debate that the spectacle wants shown.

The essential contradiction of spectacular domination in crisis is that it has failed on its strongest point -- certain paltry material satisfactions that excluded many other satisfactions, but which were presumed to be sufficient to procure the continued adhesion of the masses of producers/consumers. And it is exactly this

material satisfaction that spectacular domination has polluted and ceased to supply. The society of the spectacle began everywhere in coercion, deceit and blood, but it promised a happy path. It believed itself to be loved. Now it no longer says "What appears is good; what is good appears"; now it says simple "It is so." The society of the spectacle admits frankly that it is no longer essentially reformable, though change is its very nature (the transmutation of everything for the worst). It has lost all its general illusions about itself.

All the experts of power and all their computers are convened in permanent, multi-disciplinary consultations, if not in order to find the means to cure a sick society, then at least in order to retain the appearance of survival for as long as it will be able to do so, and even beyond the state of coma, as did Franco and Boumediene. An old popular song from Tuscany ends more quickly and wisely: *E la vita non e la morte, E la morte non e la vita, La canzone e gia finita.*

Anyone who will read this book attentively will see that it gives no kind of assurances about the victory of the revolution or the duration of its operations or the rough roads it will have to travel, and still less about its capacity -- sometimes rashly boasted of -- to bring perfect happiness to everyone. Less than any other, my conception -- which is

historical and strategical -- can only consider that life should be a trouble-free and evil-free idyll, for the sole reason that it would be pleasant for us, and that the evil doings of a few owners and leaders alone create the unhappiness of the masses. Each person is the offspring of their works; as passivity makes it bed, so it shall lie in it. The most significant result of the catastrophic decomposition of class society is that, for the first time in history, the old problem of knowing if men [sic] as a whole really love freedom finds itself superceded, because now they are going to be compelled to love it.

It is fair to recognize the difficulty and the immensity of the tasks of the revolution that wants to create and maintain a classless society. It can begin easily enough wherever autonomous proletarian assemblies, not recognizing any authority outside themselves or the property of anyone whatsoever, placing their will above all laws and specializations, abolish the separation of individual, the commodity economy and the State. But it will only triumph by imposing itself universally, without leaving a patch of territory to any form of alienated society that still exists. There we will see again an Athens or a Florence that reaches to all the corners of the world, a city from which no one will be rejected and which, having brought down all of its enemies, will at last be able to surrender itself joyously to the



true divisions and never-ending confrontations of historical life.

Who can still believe in some less radically realistic issue? Under each result and under each project of an unfortunate and ridiculous present, we see inscribed the *Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* that announces the inevitable fall of all cities of illusion. The days of this society are numbered; its reasons and its merits have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting; its inhabitants are divided into two parties, one of which wants this society to disappear.

**[Editor's note: the original text of this translation published by Chronos Publications (BM Chronos, London WC1N 3XX) was riddled with both typographical errors and badly-worded English phrases. The text presented above has been both proofread and edited.]**

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## PREFACE TO THE THIRD FRENCH EDITION OF *LA SOCIÉTÉ DU SPECTACLE*

**GUY DEBORD**

30 June, 1992

Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith

*La Société du spectacle*  
(<http://www.nothingness.org/SI/debord/SOTS/sotscontents.html>) was first published in November 1967 by the Paris publishers Buchet-Chastel. The disturbances of 1968 made the book known. A second edition, strictly unaltered, was issued in 1971 by Editions Champ Libre, a publishing house whose name was changed to Editions Gérard Lebovici in 1984 in the wake of the murder of the publisher. That edition was reprinted regularly until 1991. The text of this third edition is also identical of that to 1967. (Naturally, the same principle will be applied to my other books, all of which are

to be republished by Gallimard; I am not someone who revises his work.)

**A critical theory** of the kind presented here needed no changing — not as long, at any rate, as the general conditions of the long historical period that it was the first to describe accurately were still intact. The continued unfolding of our epoch has merely confirmed and further illustrated the theory of the spectacle. The reiteration of this theory may also be considered historical in a less elevated sense, for it testifies to what was the most extreme position taken up during the confrontation of 1968, and hence to what it was possible to know by then. The biggest dupes of that time have since received a clear object lesson — in the form of their own shattered existences — as to what exactly was meant by the "negation of life become visible," by the "loss of quality" associated with the commodity-form or by the "proletarianization of the world."

**I have since** — as called for — added postscripts on the more striking novelties thrown up by the fundamental movement of the times. In 1979, in the [preface to a new Italian translation](#), I dealt with the effective changes in the nature of industrial production, as in the techniques of government, that began with the deployment of the power of the spectacle. And in 1988 my [Comments on the Society of the Spectacle](#) offered irrefutable evidence that the former "worldwide division of spectacular tasks" between the rival realms

of the "concentrated" and "diffuse" forms of the spectacle had now given way to a combined form — to an "integrated" spectacle.

**This amalgamation** might be summed up by slightly revising Thesis 105 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, which drew a distinction, on the basis of the situation prior to 1967, between two different forms of practice: the Great Schism of class power having been reconciled, we ought now to say that the unified practice of the integrated spectacle has "transformed the world economically" *as well as* "using police methods to transform perception." (The police in question, incidentally, are of a completely new variety.)

**It was only** because this fusion had already occurred worldwide on the economic and political planes that the world could be declared officially unified. It was, furthermore, only because of the grave predicament in which separated power universally finds itself that this world needed unifying post haste, so that it might function as *one bloc* in a single consensual organization of the world market, at once travestied and buttressed by the spectacle. And yet, in the end, it will not be unified.

**The totalitarian bureaucracy** — that "substitute ruling class for the market economy" — never had much faith in its own destiny. It knew itself to be nothing but an undeveloped type of ruling class" even as it yearned to be something more. Long ago,

Thesis 58 had established as axiomatic that "The spectacle has its roots in the fertile field of the economy, and it is the produce of this field which must in the end come to dominate the spectacular market."

**This striving of the spectacle** toward modernization and unification, together with all the other tendencies toward the simplification of society, was what in 1989 led the Russian bureaucracy suddenly, and as one man, to convert to the current *ideology* of democracy — in other words, to the dictatorial freedom of the Market, as tempered by the recognition of the rights of Homo Spectator. No one in the West felt the need to spend more than a single day considering the import and impact of this extraordinary media event — proof enough, were proof called for, of the progress made by the techniques of the spectacle. All that needed recording was the fact that a sort of geological tremor had apparently taken place. The phenomenon was duly noted, dated and deemed sufficiently well understood; a very simple sign, "the fall of the Berlin Wall," repeated over and over again, immediately attained the incontestability of all the other *signs of democracy*.

**In 1991** the first effects of this spectacular modernization were felt in the complete disintegration of Russia. Thus — more clearly even than in the West — were the disastrous results of the general development of the economy made manifest.

The disorder presently reigning in the East is no more than a consequence. The same formidable question that has been haunting the world for two centuries is about to be posed again *everywhere*: How can the poor be made to work once their illusions have been shattered, and once force has been defeated?

**Thesis 111**, discerning the first symptoms of that Russian decline whose final explosion we have just witnessed and envisioning the early disappearance of a world society which (as we may now put it) will one day be erased from the memory of the computer, offered a strategic assessment whose accuracy will very soon be obvious: The "crumbling of the worldwide alliance founded on bureaucratic mystification is in the last analysis the most unfavorable portent for the future development of capitalist society."

**This book should be read** bearing in mind that it was written with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society. There was never anything outrageous, however, about what it had to say.

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## THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

**(*New translation of the book by Guy Debord*)**

1. [The Culmination of Separation](#)
  2. [The Commodity as Spectacle](#)
  3. [Unity and Division Within Appearances](#)
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  8. [Negation and Consumption Within Culture](#)
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- 

### *Translator's Note*

There have been several previous English translations of *The Society of the Spectacle*. I have gone through them all and have retained whatever seemed already to be adequate. In particular, I have adopted quite a few of Donald Nicholson-Smith's renderings, though I have diverged from him in many other cases. His translation (Zone Books, 1994) and the earlier one by Fredy Perlman and John Supak (Black and Red, 1977) are both in print, and both can also be found at the [Situationist International Online](http://situationist.cjb.net/) ("http://situationist.cjb.net/") website.

I believe that my translation conveys Debord's actual meaning more accurately, as well as more clearly and idiomatically, than any of the other versions. I am nevertheless aware that it is far from perfect, and welcome any criticisms or suggestions.

If you find the opening chapters too difficult, you might try starting with Chapter 4 or Chapter 5. As you see how Debord deals with concrete historical events, you may get a better idea of the practical implications of ideas that are presented more abstractly in the other chapters.

The book is not, however, as difficult or abstract as it is reputed to be. It is not an ivory-tower academic or philosophical discourse. It is an effort to clarify the nature of the society in which we find ourselves and the advantages and drawbacks of various methods for changing it. Every single thesis has a direct or indirect bearing on issues that are matters of life and death. Chapter 4, which with remarkable conciseness sums up the lessons of two centuries of revolutionary experience, is simply the most obvious example.

—Ken Knabb  
February 2002

***P.S. (March):***

In answer to a number of queries I have received: At the moment I have no plans to publish this translation in book form. For one thing, I'm not yet completely satisfied

with it, and will be fine-tuning it over the next few months. Then I may start considering different publication possibilities, depending on what sort of interest has been expressed.

Another reason is that Alice Debord has asked me to prepare [new translations of all of Debord's films](#), to be used in subtitling them for English-speaking audiences. One of those films, of course, is based on this book, so I will want to get that taken care of (which may involve minor last-minute changes in the portions of the book that are used in the film) before thinking about book publication.

***P.P.S. (July):***

During the last few weeks I have made a considerable number of stylistic revisions in the *Society of the Spectacle* translation. Although I will continue to make any improvements that occur to me, the translation as it now stands is probably pretty close to final.

## CHAPTER 1: THE CULMINATION OF SEPARATION

*"But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence . . . truth is considered profane, and only illusion is sacred. Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness."*

—Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*

### 1

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived is now merely represented in the distance.

### 2

The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of life can no longer be recovered. *Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudoworld* that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The

spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.

### 3

The spectacle appears simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a *means of unification*. As a part of society, it is ostensibly the focal point of all vision and consciousness. But due to the very fact that this sector is *separate*, it is in reality the domain of delusion and false consciousness. The unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.

### 4

The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.

### 5

The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized.

### 6

Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society's unreality. In all its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — the spectacle represents the dominant *model* of life. It is the omnipresent

affirmation of the choices that have *already been made* in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system. The spectacle also represents the *constant presence* of this justification since it monopolizes the majority of the time spent outside the production process.

## 7

Separation is itself an integral part of the unity of the world, of a global social practice split into reality and image. The social practice confronted by an autonomous spectacle is at the same time the real totality which contains that spectacle. But the split within this totality mutilates it to the point that the spectacle seems to be its goal. The language of the spectacle consists of *signs* of the dominant system of production — signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that system.

## 8

The spectacle cannot be abstractly contrasted to concrete social activity; each side of such a duality is itself divided. The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides.

Each concept established in this manner has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and support of the existing society.

## 9

In a world that is *really turned upside down*, the true is a moment of the false.

## 10

The concept of “the spectacle” interrelates and explains a wide range of seemingly unconnected phenomena. The apparent diversities and contrasts of these phenomena stem from the social organization of appearances, whose essential nature must itself be recognized. Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with those appearances. But a critique that grasps the spectacle’s essential character reveals it to be a visible *negation* of life — a negation of life that has taken on a *visible form*.

## 11

In order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions, and the forces that work against it, it is necessary to make some artificial distinctions. In *analyzing* the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle’s own language, in the

sense that we have to move through the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle. For the spectacle is both the *meaning* and the *agenda* of our particular socio-economic formation. It is the historical moment in which we are caught.

## 12

The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: "What appears is good; what is good appears." The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.

## 13

The tautological character of the spectacle stems from the fact that its means and ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the globe, endlessly basking in its own glory.

## 14

The society based on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is *fundamentally spectacularist*. In the spectacle — the visual reflection of the ruling economic order — goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.



## 15

As indispensable embellishment of currently produced objects, as general articulation of the system's rationales, and as advanced economic sector that directly creates an ever-increasing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the *leading production* of present-day society.

## 16

The spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them. It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers.

## 17

The first stage of the economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of *being* into *having* — human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from *having* to *appearing* — all “having” must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. At the same time all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them.

Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is *not actually real*.

## 18

When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings — dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to *show* us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch; the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people's activity, whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever *representation* becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself.

## 19

The spectacle inherits the *weakness* of the Western philosophical project, which attempted to understand activity by means of the categories of *vision*, and it is based on the relentless development of the particular technical rationality that grew out of that form of thought. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality,

reducing everyone's concrete life to a universe of *speculation*.

## 20

Philosophy — the power of separate thought and the thought of separate power — was never by itself able to supersede theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispersed the religious mists into which human beings had projected their own alienated powers; it has merely brought those mists down to earth, to the point that even the most mundane aspects of life have become impenetrable and unbreathable. The illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself. The spectacle is the technological version of the exiling of human powers into a “world beyond”; the culmination of humanity's *internal* separation.

## 21

As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain a social necessity. The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains, and ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of this sleep.

## 22

The fact that the practical power of modern society has detached itself from that society

and established an independent realm in the spectacle can be explained only by the additional fact that that powerful practice continued to lack cohesion and had remained in contradiction with itself.

## 23

The root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of *power*. The spectacle plays the specialized role of speaking in the name of all the other activities. It is hierarchical society's ambassador to itself, delivering its official messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak. The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic.

## 24

The spectacle is the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life. The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations conceals their true character as relations between people and between classes: a second Nature, with its own inescapable laws, seems to dominate our environment. But the spectacle is not the inevitable consequence of some supposedly natural technological development. On the contrary, the society of the spectacle is a form that chooses its own technological content. If the spectacle, considered in the limited sense of

the “mass media” that are its most glaring superficial manifestation, seems to be invading society in the form of a mere technical apparatus, it should be understood that this apparatus is in no way neutral and that it has been developed in accordance with the spectacle’s internal dynamics. If the social needs of the age in which such technologies are developed can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact between people has become totally dependent on these means of instantaneous communication, it is because this “communication” is essentially *unilateral*. The concentration of these media thus amounts to concentrating in the hands of the administrators of the existing system the means that enable them to carry on this particular form of administration. The social separation reflected in the spectacle is inseparable from the modern *state* — that product of the social division of labor that is both the chief instrument of class rule and the concentrated expression of all social divisions.

## 25

*Separation* is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. The institutionalization of the social division of labor in the form of class divisions had given rise to an earlier, religious form of contemplation: the mythical order with which every power has always camouflaged itself. Religion justified

the cosmic and ontological order that corresponded to the interests of the masters, expounding and embellishing everything their societies *could not deliver*. In this sense, all separate power has been spectacular. But this earlier universal devotion to a fixed religious imagery was only a shared acknowledgment of loss, an imaginary compensation for the poverty of a concrete social activity that was still generally experienced as a unitary condition. In contrast, the modern spectacle depicts what society *could* deliver, but in so doing it rigidly separates what is *possible* from what is *permitted*. The spectacle keeps people in a state of unconsciousness as they pass through practical changes in their conditions of existence. Like a factitious god, it generates itself and makes its own rules. It reveals itself for what it *is*: an autonomously developing separate power, based on the increasing productivity resulting from an increasingly refined division of labor into parcelized gestures dictated by the independent movement of machines, and working for an ever-expanding market. In the course of this development, all community and all critical awareness have disintegrated; and the forces that were able to grow by separating from each other have not yet been *reunited*.

## 26

The general separation of worker and product tends to eliminate any consistent

sense of accomplished activity and any direct personal communication between producers. With the increasing accumulation of separate products and the increasing concentration of the productive process, accomplishment and communication are monopolized by the managers of the system. The triumph of this separation-based economic system *proletarianizes* the whole world.

## 27

Due to the very success of this separate production of separation, the fundamental experience that in earlier societies was associated with people's primary work is in the process of being replaced (in sectors near the cutting edge of the system's evolution) by an identification of life with nonworking time, with inactivity. But such inactivity is in no way liberated from productive activity; it remains dependent on it, in an uneasy and admiring submission to the requirements and consequences of the production system. It is itself one of the consequences of that system. There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle activity is nullified — all *real* activity having been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. Thus, what is referred to as a "liberation from work," namely the modern increase in leisure time, is neither a liberation of work itself nor a liberation from the world shaped by this kind of work. None of the activity

stolen by work can be regained by submitting to what that work has produced.

## 28

The reigning economic system is a *vicious circle of isolation*. Its technologies are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. From cars to television, the goods that the spectacular system *chooses to produce* also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender “lonely crowds.” With ever-increasing concreteness the spectacle recreates its own presuppositions.

## 29

The spectacle was born from the world’s loss of the unity, and the immense expansion of the modern spectacle reveals the enormity of this loss. The abstractifying of all individual labor and the general abstractness of what is produced are perfectly reflected in the spectacle, whose *manner of being concrete* is precisely *abstraction*. In the spectacle, a part of the world *presents itself* to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is the common language of this separation. Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only *in their separateness*.

## 30



The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.

### 31

Workers do not produce themselves, they produce a power independent of themselves. The *success* of this production, the abundance it generates, is experienced by the producers as an *abundance of dispossession*. As their alienated products accumulate, all time and space become *foreign* to them. The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map that is identical to the territory it represents. The forces that have escaped us *display themselves* to us in all their power.

### 32

The spectacle's social function is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic expansion consists primarily of the expansion of this particular sector of industrial production. The "growth"

generated by an economy developing for its own sake can be nothing other than a growth of the very alienation that was at its origin.

### 33

Though separated from what they produce, human beings nevertheless produce every detail of their world with ever-increasing power. They thus also find themselves increasingly separated from that world. The closer their life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that life.

### 34

The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point that it becomes images.

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Chapter 1 of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (Paris, 1967). Translated by Ken Knabb.

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## CHAPTER 2:THE COMMODITY AS SPECTACLE

*"The commodity can be understood in its undistorted essence only when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the attitudes that people adopt toward it, as it subjugates their consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression. . . . As labor is increasingly rationalized and mechanized, this subjugation is reinforced by the fact that people's activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative."*  
—Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

### 35

In the spectacle's basic practice of incorporating into itself all the *fluid* aspects of human activity so as to possess them in a congealed form, and of *inverting* living values into purely abstract values, we recognize our old enemy *the commodity*, which seems at first glance so trivial and obvious, yet which is actually so complex and full of metaphysical subtleties.

### 36

The fetishism of the commodity — the domination of society by "intangible as well as tangible things" — attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images

which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality.

### 37

The world at once present and absent which the spectacle *holds up to view* is the world of the commodity dominating all living experience. The world of the commodity is thus shown for *what it is*, because its development is identical to people's *estrangement* from each other and from everything they produce.

### 38

The loss of quality that is so evident at every level of spectacular language, from the objects it glorifies to the behavior it regulates, stems from the basic nature of a production system that shuns reality. The commodity form reduces everything to quantitative equivalence. The quantitative is what it develops, and it can develop only within the quantitative.

### 39

Despite the fact that this development excludes the qualitative, it is itself subject to qualitative change. The spectacle reflects the fact that this development has crossed the threshold of *its own abundance*. Although this qualitative change has as yet taken place only partially in a few local areas, it is already implicit at the universal level that was the commodity's original

standard — a standard that the commodity has lived up to by turning the whole planet into a single world market.

## 40

The development of productive forces is the *unconscious history* that has actually created and altered the living conditions of human groups — the conditions enabling them to survive and the expansion of those conditions. It has been the economic basis of all human undertakings. Within natural economies, the emergence of a commodity sector represented a surplus survival. Commodity production, which implies the exchange of varied products between independent producers, tended for a long time to retain its small-scale craft aspects, relegated as it was to a marginal economic role where its quantitative reality was still hidden. But whenever it encountered the social conditions of large-scale commerce and capital accumulation, it took total control of the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity had already shown itself to be in the course of this conquest: a process of quantitative development. This constant expansion of economic power in the form of commodities transformed human labor itself into a commodity, into *wage labor*, and ultimately produced a level of abundance sufficient to solve the initial problem of survival — but only in such a way that the same problem is continually being regenerated at a higher

level. Economic growth has liberated societies from the natural pressures that forced them into an immediate struggle for survival; but they have not yet been liberated from their liberator. The commodity's *independence* has spread to the entire economy it now dominates. This economy has transformed the world, but it has merely transformed it into a world dominated by the economy. The pseudonature within which human labor has become alienated demands that such labor remain forever *in its service*; and since this demand is formulated by and answerable only to itself, it in fact ends up channeling all socially permitted projects and endeavors into its own reinforcement. The abundance of commodities — that is, the abundance of commodity relations — amounts to nothing more than an *augmented survival*.

#### 41

As long as the economy's role as material basis of social life was neither noticed nor understood (remaining unknown precisely because it was so familiar), the commodity's dominion over the economy was exerted in a covert manner. In societies where actual commodities were few and far between, money was the apparent master, serving as plenipotentary representative of the greater power that remained unknown. With the Industrial Revolution's manufactural division of labor and mass production for a global market, the commodity finally became fully

visible as a power that was *colonizing* all social life. It was at this point that political economy established itself as the dominant science, and as the science of domination.

## 42

The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in *totally* colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship both extensively and intensively. In the less industrialized regions, its reign is already manifested by the presence of a few star commodities and by the imperialist domination imposed by the more industrially advanced regions. In the latter, social space is blanketed with ever-new layers of commodities. With the "second industrial revolution," alienated consumption has become just as much a duty for the masses as alienated production. The society's *entire sold labor* has become a *total commodity* whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has to be returned in fragmented form to fragmented individuals who are completely cut off from the overall operation of the productive forces. To this end the specialized science of domination is broken down into further specialties such as sociology, applied psychology, cybernetics,

and semiology, which oversee the self-regulation of every phase of the process.

### 43

Whereas during the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation "political economy considers the proletarian only as a *worker*," who only needs to be allotted the indispensable minimum for maintaining his labor power, and never considers him "in his leisure and humanity," this ruling-class perspective is revised as soon as commodity abundance reaches a level that requires an additional collaboration from him. Once his workday is over, the worker is suddenly redeemed from the total contempt toward him that is so clearly implied by every aspect of the organization and surveillance of production, and finds himself seemingly treated like a grownup, with a great show of politeness, in his new role as a consumer. At this point the *humanism of the commodity* takes charge of the worker's "leisure and humanity" simply because political economy now can and must dominate those spheres *as political economy*. The "perfected denial of man" has thus taken charge of all human existence.

### 44

The spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws. Consumable survival must



constantly expand because it never ceases to *include privation*. If augmented survival never comes to a resolution, if there is no point where it might stop expanding, this is because it is itself stuck in the realm of privation. It may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

#### 45

Automation, which is both the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice, obliges the commodity system to resolve the following contradiction: The technological developments that objectively tend to eliminate work must at the same time preserve *labor as a commodity*, because labor is the only creator of commodities. The only way to prevent automation (or any other less extreme method of increasing labor productivity) from reducing society's total necessary labor time is to create new jobs. To this end the reserve army of the unemployed is enlisted into the tertiary or "service" sector, reinforcing the troops responsible for distributing and glorifying the latest commodities; and in this it is serving a real need, in the sense that increasingly extensive campaigns are necessary to convince people to buy increasingly unnecessary commodities.

#### 46

Exchange value could arise only as a representative of use value, but the victory it

eventually won with its own weapons created the conditions for its own autonomous power. By mobilizing all human use value and monopolizing its fulfillment, exchange value ultimately succeeded in *controlling it*. Usefulness has come to be seen purely in terms of exchange value, and is now completely at its mercy. Starting out like a mercenary in the service of use value, exchange value has ended up waging the war for its own sake.

#### 47

The constant *decline of use value* that has always characterized the capitalist economy has given rise to a new form of poverty within the realm of augmented survival — alongside the old poverty which still persists, since the vast majority of people are still forced to take part as wage workers in the unending pursuit of the system's ends and each of them knows that he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail — the fact that even in its most impoverished forms (food, shelter) use value now has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival — accounts for the general acceptance of the illusions of modern commodity consumption. The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression.

#### 48

Use value was formerly understood as an implicit aspect of exchange value. Now, however, within the upside-down world of the spectacle, it must be explicitly proclaimed, both because its actual reality has been eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because it serves as a necessary pseudojustification for a counterfeit life.

#### 49

The spectacle is the flip side of money. It, too, is an abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But whereas money has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence — the exchangeability of different goods whose uses remain uncomparable — the spectacle is the modern complement of money: a representation of the commodity world as a whole which serves as a general equivalent for what the entire society can be and can do. The spectacle is money one can *only look at*, because in it all use has already been exchanged for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not just a servant of *pseudo-use*, it is already in itself a pseudo-use of life.

#### 50

With the achievement of *economic* abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible, subjecting all reality to the appearances that are now that labor's primary product. Capital is no longer the

invisible center governing the production process; as it accumulates, it spreads to the ends of the earth in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.

## 51

The economy's triumph as an independent power at the same time spells its own doom, because the forces it has unleashed have eliminated the *economic necessity* that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity with a necessity for boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs (now scarcely met) with an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds, all of which ultimately come down to the single pseudoneed of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. But that economy loses all connection with authentic needs insofar as it emerges from the *social unconscious* that unknowingly depended on it. "Whatever is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once it is freed, it too falls to ruin" (Freud).

## 52

Once society discovers that it depends on the economy, the economy in fact depends on the society. When the subterranean power of the economy grew to the point of visible domination, it lost its power. The economic *Id* must be replaced by the *I*. This subject can only arise out of society, that is,

out of the struggle within society. Its existence depends on the outcome of the class struggle that is both product and producer of the economic foundation of history.

### 53

Consciousness of desire and desire for consciousness are the same project, the project that in its negative form seeks the abolition of classes and the workers' direct possession of every aspect of their activity. The *opposite* of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

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Chapter 2 of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (Paris, 1967). Translated by Ken Knabb.

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### CHAPTER 3: UNITY AND DIVISION WITHIN APPEARANCES

*"A lively new polemic about the concepts 'one divides into two' and 'two fuse into one' is unfolding on the philosophical front in this country. This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian conception and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that 'one divides into two' is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that 'two fuse into one' are against the materialist dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic is a reflection, on the ideological level, of the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world."*

—*Red Flag* (Beijing), 21 September 1964

#### **54**

The spectacle, like modern society itself, is at once united and divided. The unity of each is based on violent divisions. But when this contradiction emerges in the spectacle, it is itself contradicted by a reversal of its meaning: the division it presents is unitary, while the unity it presents is divided.

## 55

Although the struggles between different powers for control of the same socio-economic system are officially presented as irreconcilable antagonisms, they actually reflect that system's fundamental unity, both internationally and within each nation.

## 56

The sham spectacular struggles between rival forms of separate power are at the same time real, in that they express the system's uneven and conflictual development and the more or less contradictory interests of the classes or sections of classes that accept that system and strive to carve out a role for themselves within it. Just as the development of the most advanced economies involves clashes between different priorities, totalitarian state-bureaucratic forms of economic management and countries under colonialism or semicolonialism also exhibit highly divergent types of production and power. By invoking any number of different criteria, the spectacle can present these oppositions as totally distinct social systems. But in reality they are nothing but particular sectors whose fundamental essence lies in the global system that contains them, the single movement that has turned the whole planet into its field of operation: capitalism.

## 57

The society that bears the spectacle does not dominate underdeveloped regions solely by its economic hegemony. It also dominates them *as the society of the spectacle*. Even where the material base is still absent, modern society has already used the spectacle to invade the social surface of every continent. It sets the stage for the formation of indigenous ruling classes and frames their agendas. Just as it presents pseudogoods to be coveted, it offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. The bureaucratic regimes in power in certain industrialized countries have their own particular type of spectacle, but it is an integral part of the total spectacle, serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support. Even if local manifestations of the spectacle include certain totalitarian specializations of communication and control, from the standpoint of the overall functioning of the system those specializations are simply playing their allotted role within a *global division of spectacular tasks*.

## 58

Although this division of spectacular tasks preserves the existing order as a whole, it is primarily oriented toward protecting its dominant pole of development. The spectacle is rooted in the economy of abundance, and the products of that economy ultimately tend to dominate the spectacular market and override the ideological or police-state protectionist



barriers set up by local spectacles with pretensions of independence.

## 59

Behind the glitter of spectacular distractions, a tendency toward *banalization* dominates modern society the world over, even where the more advanced forms of commodity consumption have seemingly multiplied the variety of roles and objects to choose from. The vestiges of religion and of the family (the latter is still the primary mechanism for transferring class power from one generation to the next), along with the vestiges of moral repression imposed by those two institutions, can be blended with ostentatious pretensions of worldly gratification precisely because life in this particular world remains repressive and offers nothing but pseudogratiifications. Complacent acceptance of the status quo may also coexist with purely spectacular rebelliousness — dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economy of abundance develops the capacity to process that particular raw material.

## 60

Stars — spectacular representations of living human beings — project this general banality into images of possible roles. As specialists of *apparent life*, stars serve as superficial objects that people can identify with in order to compensate for the

fragmented productive specializations that they actually live. The function of these celebrities is to act out various lifestyles or sociopolitical viewpoints in a *full, totally free manner*. They embody the inaccessible results of social *labor* by dramatizing the by-products of that labor which are magically projected above it as its ultimate goals: *power* and *vacations* — the decisionmaking and consumption that are at the beginning and the end of a process that is never questioned. On one hand, a governmental power may personalize itself as a pseudostar; on the other, a star of consumption may campaign for recognition as a pseudopower over life. But the activities of these stars are not really free, and they offer no real choices.

## 61

The agent of the spectacle who is put on stage as a star is the opposite of an individual; he is as clearly the enemy of his own individuality as of the individuality of others. Entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the succession of things. The stars of consumption, though outwardly representing different personality types, actually show each of these types enjoying equal access to, and deriving equal happiness from, the entire realm of consumption. The stars of decisionmaking

must possess the full range of admired human qualities; official differences between them are thus canceled out by the official similarity implied by their supposed excellence in every field of endeavor. As head of state, Khrushchev retrospectively became a general so as to take credit for the victory of the battle of Kursk twenty years after it happened. And Kennedy survived as an orator to the point of delivering his own funeral oration, since Theodore Sorenson continued to write speeches for his successor in the same style that had contributed so much toward the dead man's public persona. The admirable people who personify the system are well known for not being what they seem; they attain greatness by stooping below the reality of the most insignificant individual life, and everyone knows it.

## 62

The false choices offered by spectacular abundance — choices based on the juxtaposition of competing yet mutually reinforcing spectacles and of distinct yet interconnected roles (signified and embodied primarily by objects) — develop into struggles between illusory qualities designed to generate fervent allegiance to quantitative trivialities. Fallacious archaic oppositions are revived — regionalisms and racisms which serve to endow mundane rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority — and

pseudoplayful enthusiasms are aroused by an endless succession of ludicrous competitions, from sports to elections. Wherever abundant consumption is established, one particular spectacular opposition is always in the forefront of illusory roles: the antagonism between youth and adults. But real adults — people who are masters of their own lives — are in fact nowhere to be found. And a youthful transformation of what exists is in no way characteristic of those who are now young; it is present solely in the economic system, in the dynamism of capitalism. It is *things* that rule and that are young, vying with each other and constantly replacing each another.

### 63

Spectacular oppositions conceal the *unity of poverty*. If different forms of the same alienation struggle against each other in the guise of irreconcilable antagonisms, this is because they are all based on real contradictions that are repressed. The spectacle exists in a *concentrated* form and a *diffuse* form, depending on the requirements of the particular stage of poverty it denies and supports. In both cases, it is nothing more than an image of happy harmony surrounded by desolation and horror, at the calm center of misery.

### 64

The concentrated spectacle is primarily associated with bureaucratic capitalism, though it may also be imported as a technique for reinforcing state power in more backward mixed economies or even adopted by advanced capitalism during certain moments of crisis. Bureaucratic property is itself concentrated, in that the individual bureaucrat takes part in the ownership of the entire economy only through his membership in the community of bureaucrats. And since commodity production is less developed under bureaucratic capitalism, it too takes on a concentrated form: the commodity the bureaucracy appropriates is the total social labor, and what it sells back to the society is that society's wholesale survival. The dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice because it has had to make all the choices itself, and any choice made independently of it, whether regarding food or music or anything else, thus amounts to a declaration of war against it. This dictatorship must be enforced by permanent violence. Its spectacle imposes an image of the good which subsumes everything that officially exists, an image which is usually concentrated in a single individual, the guarantor of the system's totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this absolute star or disappear. This master of everyone else's nonconsumption is the heroic image that

disguises the absolute exploitation entailed by the system of primitive accumulation accelerated by terror. If the entire Chinese population has to study Mao to the point of identifying with Mao, this is because there is *nothing else they can be*. The dominion of the concentrated spectacle is a police state.

## 65

The diffuse spectacle is associated with commodity abundance, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here each individual commodity is justified in the name of the grandeur of the total commodity production, of which the spectacle is a laudatory catalog. Irreconcilable claims jockey for position on the stage of the affluent economy's unified spectacle, and different star commodities simultaneously promote conflicting social policies. The automobile spectacle, for example, strives for a perfect traffic flow entailing the destruction of old urban districts, while the city spectacle wants to preserve those districts as tourist attractions. The already dubious satisfaction alleged to be obtained from the *consumption of the whole* is thus constantly being disappointed because the actual consumer can directly access only a succession of fragments of this commodity heaven, fragments which invariably lack the quality attributed to the whole.

## 66

Each individual commodity fights for itself. It avoids acknowledging the others and strives to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one in existence. The spectacle is the epic poem of this struggle, a struggle that no fall of Troy can bring to an end. The spectacle does not sing of men and their arms, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle each commodity, by pursuing its own passion, unconsciously generates something beyond itself: the globalization of the commodity (which also amounts to the commodification of the globe). Thus, as a result of the *cunning of the commodity*, while each *particular* manifestation of the commodity eventually falls in battle, the general commodity-form continues onward toward its absolute realization.

## 67

The satisfaction that no longer comes from *using* the commodities produced in abundance is now sought through recognition of their value *as commodities*. Consumers are filled with religious fervor for the sovereign freedom of commodities whose use has become an end in itself. Waves of enthusiasm for particular products are propagated by all the communications media. A film sparks a fashion craze; a magazine publicizes night spots which in turn spin off different lines of products. The proliferation of faddish gadgets reflects the fact that as the mass of commodities

becomes increasingly absurd, absurdity itself becomes a commodity. Trinkets such as key chains which come as free bonuses with the purchase of some luxury product, but which end up being traded back and forth as valued collectibles in their own right, reflect a mystical self-abandonment to commodity transcendence. Those who collect the trinkets that have been manufactured for the sole purpose of being collected are accumulating commodity *indulgences* — glorious tokens of the commodity's real presence among the faithful. Reified people proudly display the proofs of their intimacy with the commodity. Like the old religious fetishism, with its convulsionary raptures and miraculous cures, the fetishism of commodities generates its own moments of fervent exaltation. All this is useful for only one purpose: producing habitual submission.

## 68

The pseudoneeds imposed by modern consumerism cannot be opposed by any genuine needs or desires that are not themselves also shaped by society and its history. But commodity abundance represents a total break in the organic development of social needs. Its mechanical accumulation unleashes an *unlimited artificiality* which overpowers any living desire. The cumulative power of this autonomous artificiality ends up by *falsifying all social life*.



## 69

The image of blissful social unification through consumption merely *postpones* the consumer's awareness of the actual divisions until his next disillusionment with some particular commodity. Each new product is ceremoniously acclaimed as a unique creation offering a dramatic shortcut to the promised land of total consummation. But as with the fashionable adoption of seemingly aristocratic first names which end up being given to virtually all individuals of the same age, the objects that promise uniqueness can be offered up for mass consumption only if they have been mass-produced. The prestigiousness of mediocre objects of this kind is solely due to the fact that they have been placed, however briefly, at the center of social life and hailed as a revelation of the unfathomable purposes of production. But the object that was prestigious in the spectacle becomes mundane as soon as it is taken home by its consumer — and by all its other consumers. Too late, it reveals its essential poverty, a poverty that stems from the poverty of its production. Meanwhile, some other object is already replacing it as representative of the system and demanding its own moment of acclaim.

## 70

The fraudulence of the satisfactions offered by the system is exposed by this continual replacement of products and of general

conditions of production. In both the diffuse and the concentrated spectacle, entities that have brazenly asserted their definitive perfection nevertheless end up changing, and only the system endures. Stalin, like any other outmoded commodity, is denounced by the very forces that originally promoted him. Each *new lie* of the advertising industry is an implicit *admission* of its previous lie. And with each downfall of a personification of totalitarian power, the *illusory community* that had unanimously approved him is exposed as nothing but a coalition of loners without illusions.

## 71

The things the spectacle presents as eternal are based on change, and must change as their foundations change. The spectacle is totally dogmatic, yet it is incapable of arriving at any really solid dogma. Nothing stands still for it. This instability is the spectacle's natural condition, but it is completely contrary to its natural inclination.

## 72

The unreal unity proclaimed by the spectacle masks the class division underlying the real unity of the capitalist mode of production. What obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what excludes them from it. What links people up by liberating them from their local and national limitations is

also what keeps them apart. What requires increased rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchical exploitation and repression. What produces society's abstract power also produces its concrete *lack of freedom*.

## CHAPTER 4: THE PROLETARIAT AS SUBJECT AND REPRESENTATION

*"Equal right to all the goods and pleasures of this world, the destruction of all authority, the negation of all moral restraints — in the final analysis, these are the aims behind the March 18th insurrection and the charter of the fearsome organization that furnished it with an army."*

—Parliamentary Inquest on the Paris Commune

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The real movement that transforms existing conditions has been the dominant social force since the bourgeoisie's victory within the economic sphere, and this dominance became visible once that victory was translated onto the political plane. The development of productive forces shattered the old production relations, and all static order crumbled. Everything that was absolute became historical.

74

When people are thrust into history and forced to participate in the work and struggles that constitute history, they find themselves obliged to view their relationships in a clear and disabused manner. This history has no object distinct from what it creates from out of itself, although the final unconscious metaphysical vision of the historical era considered the

productive progression through which history had unfolded as itself the object of history. As for the *subject* of history, it can be nothing other than the self-production of the living — living people becoming masters and possessors of their own historical world and of their own *fully conscious adventures*.

75

The class struggles of the long *era of revolutions* initiated by the rise of the bourgeoisie have developed in tandem with the dialectical "*thought of history*" — the thought which is no longer content to seek the meaning of what exists, but which strives to learn how to supersede what exists, and in the process breaks down every separation.

76

For Hegel the point was no longer to interpret the world, but to interpret the *transformation* of the world. But because he limited himself to *merely interpreting* that transformation, Hegel only represents the *philosophical* culmination of philosophy. He seeks to understand a world that *develops by itself*. This historical thought is still a consciousness that always arrives too late, a consciousness that can only formulate *retrospective* justifications of what has already happened. It has thus gone beyond separation *only in thought*. Hegel's paradoxical stance — his subordination of the meaning of all reality to its historical

culmination while at the same time proclaiming that his own system represents that culmination — flows from the simple fact that this thinker of the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought in his philosophy only a *reconciliation* with the results of those revolutions. “Even as a philosophy of the bourgeois revolution, it does not express the entire process of this revolution, but only its concluding phase. In this sense it is a philosophy not of the revolution, but of the restoration” (Karl Korsch, “Theses on Hegel and Revolution”). Hegel performed the task of the philosopher — “the glorification of what exists” — for the last time; but already what existed for him could be nothing less than the entire movement of history. Since he nevertheless maintained the *external* position of thought, this externality could be masked only by identifying that thought with a preexisting project of the Spirit — of that absolute heroic force which has done what it willed and willed what it has done, and whose ultimate goal coincides with the present. Philosophy, in the process of being superseded by historical thought, has thus arrived at the point where it can glorify its world only by denying it, since in order to speak it must presuppose that the total history to which it has relegated everything has already come to an end, and that the only tribunal where truth could be judged is closed.

77

When the proletariat demonstrates through its own actions that this historical thought has not been forgotten, its refutation of that thought's *conclusion* is at the same time a confirmation of its *method*.

78

Historical thought can be saved only by becoming practical thought; and the practice of the proletariat as a revolutionary class can be nothing less than historical consciousness operating on the totality of its world. All the theoretical currents of the *revolutionary* working-class movement — Stirner and Bakunin as well as Marx — grew out of a critical confrontation with Hegelian thought.

79

The inseparability of Marx's theory from the Hegelian method is itself inseparable from that theory's revolutionary character, that is, from its truth. It is in this regard that the relationship between Marx and Hegel has generally been ignored or misunderstood, or even denounced as the weak point of what became fallaciously transformed into a *doctrine*: "Marxism." Bernstein implicitly revealed this connection between the dialectical method and historical *partisanship* when in his book *Evolutionary Socialism* he deplored the 1847 *Manifesto's* unscientific predictions of imminent

proletarian revolution in Germany: "This historical self-deception, so erroneous that the most naïve political visionary could hardly have done any worse, would be incomprehensible in a Marx who at that time had already seriously studied economics if we did not recognize that it reflected the lingering influence of the antithetical Hegelian dialectic, from which Marx, like Engels, could never completely free himself. In those times of general effervescence this influence was all the more fatal to him."

80

The inversion carried out by Marx in order to "salvage" the thought of the bourgeois revolutions by transferring it to a different context does not trivially consist of putting the materialist development of productive forces in place of the journey of the Hegelian Spirit toward its eventual encounter with itself — the Spirit whose objectification is identical to its alienation and whose historical wounds leave no scars. For once history becomes real, it no longer has an *end*. Marx demolished Hegel's position of *detachment* from events, as well as passive *contemplation* by any supreme external agent whatsoever. Henceforth, theory's concern is simply to know what it itself is doing. In contrast, present-day society's passive contemplation of the movement of the economy is an *untranscended* holdover from the *undialectical* aspect of Hegel's attempt to create a circular system; it is an

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approval that is no longer on the conceptual level and that no longer needs a Hegelianism to justify itself, because the movement it now praises is a sector of a world where thought no longer has any place, a sector whose mechanical development effectively dominates everything. Marx's project is a project of conscious history, in which the quantitateness that arises out of the blind development of merely economic productive forces must be transformed into a qualitative appropriation of history. The *critique of political economy* is the first act of this *end of prehistory*: "Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself."

81

Marx's theory is closely linked with scientific thought insofar as it seeks a rational understanding of the forces that really operate in society. But it ultimately goes *beyond* scientific thought, preserving it only by superseding it. It seeks to understand social *struggles*, not sociological *laws*. "We recognize only one science: the science of history" (*The German Ideology*).

82

The bourgeois era, which wants to give history a scientific foundation, overlooks the fact that the science available to it could itself arise only on the foundation of the

historical development of the economy. But history is fundamentally dependent on this economic knowledge only so long as it remains merely *economic history*. The extent to which the viewpoint of scientific observation could overlook history's effect on the economy (an overall process modifying its own scientific premises) is shown by the vanity of those socialists who thought they had calculated the exact periodicity of economic crises. Now that constant government intervention has succeeded in counteracting the tendencies toward crisis, the same type of mentality sees this delicate balance as a definitive economic harmony. The project of transcending the economy and mastering history must grasp and incorporate the science of society, but it cannot itself be a *scientific* project. The revolutionary movement remains *bourgeois* insofar as it thinks it can master current history by means of scientific knowledge.

83

The utopian currents of socialism, though they are historically grounded in criticism of the existing social system, can rightly be called utopian insofar as they ignore history (that is, insofar as they ignore actual struggles taking place and any passage of time outside the immutable perfection of their image of a happy society), but not because they reject science. On the contrary, the utopian thinkers were

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completely dominated by the scientific thought of earlier centuries. They sought the completion and fulfillment of that general rational system. They did not consider themselves unarmed prophets, for they firmly believed in the social power of scientific proof and even, in the case of Saint-Simonism, in the seizure of power by science. "Why," Sombart asked, "would they want to seize through struggle what merely needed to be *proved*?" But the utopians' scientific understanding did not include the awareness that some social groups have vested interests in maintaining the status quo, forces to maintain it, and forms of false consciousness to reinforce it. Their grasp of reality thus lagged far behind the historical reality of the development of science itself, which had been largely oriented by the *social requirements* arising from such factors, which determined not only what findings were considered acceptable, but even what might or might not become an object of scientific research. The utopian socialists remained prisoners of the *scientific manner of expounding the truth*, viewing this truth as a pure abstract image — the form in which it had established itself at a much earlier stage of social development. As Sorel noted, the utopians took *astronomy* as their model for discovering and demonstrating the laws of society; their unhistorical conception of harmony was the natural result of their attempt to apply to society the science least

dependent on history. They described this harmony as if they were Newtons discovering universal scientific laws, and the happy ending they constantly evoked "plays a role in their social science analogous to the role of inertia in classical physics" (*Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat*).

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The scientific-determinist aspect of Marx's thought was precisely what made it vulnerable to "ideologization," both during his own lifetime and even more so in the theoretical heritage he left to the workers movement. The advent of the historical subject continues to be postponed, and it is economics, the historical science *par excellence*, which is increasingly seen as guaranteeing the inevitability of its own future negation. In this way *revolutionary practice*, the only true agent of this negation, tends to be pushed out of theory's field of vision. Instead, it is seen as essential to patiently study economic development, and to go back to accepting the suffering which that development imposes with a Hegelian tranquility. The result remains "a graveyard of good intentions." The "science of revolutions" then concludes that *consciousness always comes too soon*, and has to be taught. "History has shown that we, and all who thought as we did, were wrong," Engels wrote in 1895. "It has made clear that the state of economic development on the Continent at that time

was far from being ripe." Throughout his life Marx had maintained a unitary point of view in his theory, but the *exposition* of his theory was carried out on the *terrain* of the dominant thought insofar as it took the form of critiques of particular disciplines, most notably the critique of the fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy. It was in this mutilated form, which eventually came to be seen as orthodox, that Marx's theory was transformed into "Marxism."

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The weakness of Marx's theory is naturally linked to the weakness of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of his time. The German working class failed to inaugurate a permanent revolution in 1848; the Paris Commune was defeated in isolation. As a result, revolutionary theory could not yet be fully realized. The fact that Marx was reduced to defending and refining it by cloistered scholarly work in the British Museum had a debilitating effect on the theory itself. His scientific conclusions about the future development of the working class, and the organizational practice apparently implied by those conclusions, became obstacles to proletarian consciousness at a later stage.

86

The theoretical shortcomings of the *scientific* defense of proletarian revolution

(both in its content and in its form of exposition) all ultimately result from identifying the proletariat with the bourgeoisie *with respect to the revolutionary seizure of power.*

87

As early as the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx's effort to demonstrate the legitimacy of proletarian power by citing a *repetitive* sequence of precedents led him to oversimplify his historical analysis into a *linear* model of the development of modes of production, in which class struggles invariably resulted "either in a revolutionary transformation of the entire society or in the mutual ruin of the contending classes." The plain facts of history, however, are that the "Asiatic mode of production" (as Marx himself acknowledged elsewhere) maintained its immobility despite all its class conflicts; that no serf uprising ever overthrew the feudal lords; and that none of the slave revolts in the ancient world ended the rule of the freemen. The linear schema loses sight of the fact that *the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that has ever won*; and that it is also the only class for which the development of the economy was both the cause and the consequence of its taking control of society. The same oversimplification led Marx to neglect the economic role of the state in the management of class society. If the rising bourgeoisie seemed to liberate the economy

from the state, this was true only to the extent that the previous state was an instrument of class oppression within a *static economy*. The bourgeoisie originally developed its independent economic power during the medieval period when the state had been weakening and feudalism was breaking up the stable equilibrium between different powers. In contrast, the modern state — which began to support the bourgeoisie's development through its mercantile policies and which developed into *the bourgeoisie's own state* during the *laissez-faire* era — was eventually to emerge as a central power in the planned management of the *economic process*. Marx was nevertheless able to describe the “Bonapartist” prototype of modern statist bureaucracy, the fusion of capital and state to create a “national power of capital over labor, a public force designed to maintain social servitude” — a form of social order in which the bourgeoisie renounces all historical life apart from what has been reduced to the economic history of *things*, and would like to be “condemned to the same political nothingness as all the other classes.” The sociopolitical foundations of the modern spectacle are already discernable here, and these foundations negatively imply that the proletariat is *the only pretender to historical life*.

The only two classes that really correspond to Marx's theory, the two pure classes that the entire analysis of *Capital* brings to the fore, are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These are also the only two revolutionary classes in history, but operating under very different conditions. The bourgeois revolution is done. The proletarian revolution is a yet-unrealized project, born on the foundation of the earlier revolution but differing from it qualitatively. If one overlooks the *originality* of the historical role of the bourgeoisie, one also tends to overlook the specific originality of the proletarian project, which can achieve nothing unless it carries its own banners and recognizes the "immensity of its own tasks." The bourgeoisie came to power because it was the class of the developing economy. The proletariat cannot create its own new form of power except by becoming the *class of consciousness*. The growth of productive forces will not in itself guarantee the emergence of such a power — not even indirectly by way of the increasing dispossession which that growth entails. Nor can a Jacobin-style seizure of the state be a means to this end. The proletariat cannot make use of any *ideology* designed to disguise its partial goals as general goals, because the proletariat cannot preserve any partial reality that is truly its own.



If Marx, during a certain period of his participation in the proletarian struggle, placed too great a reliance on scientific prediction, to the point of creating the intellectual basis for the illusions of economism, it is clear that he himself did not succumb to those illusions. In a well-known letter of 7 December 1867, accompanying an article criticizing *Capital* which he himself had written but which he wanted Engels to present to the press as the work of an adversary, Marx clearly indicated the limits of his own science: "The author's *subjective* tendency (imposed on him, perhaps, by his political position and his past), namely the manner in which he views and presents the final outcome of the present movement and social process, has no connection with his actual analysis." By thus disparaging the "tendentious conclusions" of his own objective analysis, and by the irony of the "perhaps" with reference to the extrascientific choices supposedly "imposed" on him, Marx implicitly revealed the methodological key to fusing the two aspects.

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The fusion of knowledge and action must be effected within the historical struggle itself, in such a way that each depends on the other for its validation. The proletarian class is formed into a subject in its process of organizing revolutionary struggles and in its reorganization of society at the *moment of*

*revolution* — this is where the *practical conditions of consciousness* must exist, conditions in which the theory of praxis is confirmed by becoming practical theory. But this crucial question of organization was virtually ignored by revolutionary theory during the period when the workers movement was first taking shape — the very period when that theory still possessed the *unitary* character it had inherited from historical thought (and which it had rightly vowed to develop into a unitary historical *practice*). Instead, the organizational question became the weakest aspect of radical theory, a confused terrain lending itself to the revival of hierarchical and statist tactics borrowed from the bourgeois revolution. The forms of organization of the workers movement that were developed on the basis of this theoretical negligence tended in turn to inhibit the maintenance of a unitary theory by breaking it up into various specialized and fragmented disciplines. This ideologically alienated theory was then no longer able to recognize the practical verifications of the unitary historical thought it had betrayed when such verifications emerged in spontaneous working-class struggles; instead, it contributed toward repressing every manifestation and memory of them. Yet those historical forms that took shape in struggle were precisely the practical terrain that was needed in order to validate the theory. They were what the theory needed,

yet that need had not been formulated theoretically. The *soviet*, for example, was not a theoretical discovery. And the most advanced theoretical truth of the International Workingmen's Association was its own existence in practice.

91

The First International's initial successes enabled it to free itself from the confused influences of the dominant ideology that had survived within it. But the defeat and repression that it soon encountered brought to the surface a conflict between two different conceptions of proletarian revolution, each of which contained an *authoritarian* aspect that amounted to abandoning the conscious self-emancipation of the working class. The feud between the Marxists and the Bakuninists, which eventually became irreconcilable, actually centered on two different issues — the question of power in a future revolutionary society and the question of the organization of the current movement — and each of the adversaries reversed their position when they went from one aspect to the other. Bakunin denounced the illusion that classes could be abolished by means of an authoritarian implementation of state power, warning that this would lead to the formation of a new bureaucratic ruling class and to the dictatorship of the most knowledgeable (or of those reputed to be such). Marx, who believed that the

concomitant maturation of economic contradictions and of the workers' education in democracy would reduce the role of a proletarian state to a brief phase needed to legitimize the new social relations brought into being by objective factors, denounced Bakunin and his supporters as an authoritarian conspiratorial elite who were deliberately placing themselves above the International with the harebrained scheme of imposing on society an irresponsible dictatorship of the most revolutionary (or of those who would designate themselves as such). Bakunin did in fact recruit followers on such a basis: "In the midst of the popular tempest we must be the invisible pilots guiding the revolution, not through any kind of overt power but through the collective dictatorship of our Alliance — a dictatorship without any badges or titles or official status, yet all the more powerful because it will have none of the appearances of power." Thus two *ideologies* of working-class revolution opposed each other, each containing a partially true critique, but each losing the unity of historical thought and setting itself up as an ideological *authority*. Powerful organizations such as German Social Democracy and the Iberian Anarchist Federation faithfully served one or the other of these ideologies; and everywhere the result was very different from what had been sought.

The fact that anarchists have seen the goal of proletarian revolution as *immediately present* represents both the strength and the weakness of collectivist anarchist struggles (the only forms of anarchism that can be taken seriously — the pretensions of the individualist forms of anarchism have always been ludicrous). From the historical thought of modern class struggles collectivist anarchism retains only the conclusion, and its constant harping on this conclusion is accompanied by a deliberate indifference to any consideration of methods. Its critique of *political struggle* has thus remained abstract, while its commitment to economic struggle has been channeled toward the mirage of a definitive solution that will supposedly be achieved by a single blow on this terrain, on the day of the general strike or the insurrection. The anarchists have saddled themselves with *fulfilling an ideal*. Anarchism remains a *merely ideological* negation of the state and of class society — the very social conditions which in their turn foster separate ideologies. It is the *ideology of pure freedom*, an ideology that puts everything on the same level and loses any conception of the “historical evil” (the negation at work within history). This fusion of all partial demands into a single all-encompassing demand has given anarchism the merit of representing the rejection of existing conditions in the name of the whole of life rather than from the standpoint of some

particular critical specialization; but the fact that this fusion has been envisaged only in the absolute, in accordance with individual whim and in advance of any practical actualization, has doomed anarchism to an all too obvious incoherence. Anarchism responds to each particular struggle by repeating and reapplying the same simple and all-embracing lesson, because this lesson has from the beginning been considered the be-all and end-all of the movement. This is reflected in Bakunin's 1873 letter of resignation from the Jura Federation: "During the past nine years the International has developed more than enough ideas to save the world, if ideas alone could save it, and I challenge anyone to come up with a new one. It's no longer the time for ideas, it's time for actions." This perspective undoubtedly retains proletarian historical thought's recognition that ideas must be put into practice, but it abandons the historical terrain by assuming that the appropriate forms for this transition to practice have already been discovered and will never change.

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The anarchists, who explicitly distinguish themselves from the rest of the workers movement by their ideological conviction, reproduce this separation of competencies within their own ranks by providing a terrain that facilitates the informal domination of each particular anarchist organization by

propagandists and defenders of their ideology, specialists whose mediocre intellectual activity is largely limited to the constant regurgitation of a few eternal truths. The anarchists' ideological reverence for unanimous decisionmaking has ended up paving the way for uncontrolled manipulation of their own organizations by *specialists in freedom*; and revolutionary anarchism expects the same type of unanimity, obtained by the same means, from the masses once they have been liberated. Furthermore, the anarchists' refusal to take into account the great differences between the conditions of a minority banded together in present-day struggles and of a postrevolutionary society of free individuals has repeatedly led to the isolation of anarchists when the moment for collective decisionmaking actually arrives, as is shown by the countless anarchist insurrections in Spain that were contained and crushed at a local level.

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The illusion more or less explicitly maintained by genuine anarchism is its constant belief that a revolution is just around the corner, and that the instantaneous accomplishment of this revolution will demonstrate the truth of anarchist ideology and of the form of practical organization that has developed in accordance with that ideology. In 1936 anarchism did indeed initiate a social

revolution, a revolution that was the most advanced expression of proletarian power ever realized. But even in that case it should be noted that the general uprising began as a merely defensive reaction to the army's attempted coup. Furthermore, inasmuch as the revolution was not carried to completion during its opening days (because Franco controlled half the country and was being strongly supported from abroad, because the rest of the international proletarian movement had already been defeated, and because the anti-Franco camp included various bourgeois forces and statist working-class parties), the organized anarchist movement proved incapable of extending the revolution's partial victories, or even of defending them. Its recognized leaders became government ministers, hostages to a bourgeois state that was destroying the revolution even as it proceeded to lose the civil war.

95

The "orthodox Marxism" of the Second International is the scientific ideology of socialist revolution, an ideology which identifies its whole truth with objective economic processes and with the progressive recognition of the inevitability of those processes by a working class educated by the organization. This ideology revives the faith in pedagogical demonstration that was found among the utopian socialists, combining that faith with a *contemplative*



invocation of the course of history; but it has lost both the Hegelian dimension of total history and the static image of totality presented by the utopians (most richly by Fourier). This type of scientific attitude, which can do nothing more than resurrect the traditional dilemmas between symmetrical ethical choices, is at the root of Hilferding's absurd conclusion that recognizing the inevitability of socialism "gives no indication as to what practical attitude should be adopted. For it is one thing to recognize that something is inevitable, and quite another to put oneself in the service of that inevitability" (*Finanzkapital*). Those who failed to realize that for Marx and for the revolutionary proletariat unitary historical thought was *in no way distinct from a practical attitude to be adopted* generally ended up becoming victims of the practice they did adopt.

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The ideology of the social-democratic organizations put those organizations under the control of the *professors* who were educating the working class, and their organizational forms corresponded to this type of passive apprenticeship. The participation of the socialists of the Second International in political and economic struggles was admittedly concrete, but it was profoundly *uncritical*. It was a manifestly *reformist* practice carried on in the name of an *illusory revolutionism*. This

ideology of revolution inevitably foundered on the very successes of those who proclaimed it. The elevation of socialist journalists and parliamentary representatives above the rest of the movement encouraged them to become habituated to a bourgeois lifestyle (most of them had in any case been recruited from the bourgeois intelligentsia). And even industrial workers who had been recruited out of struggles in the factories were transformed by the trade-union bureaucracy into brokers of labor-power, whose task was to make sure that that commodity was sold at a "fair" price. For the activity of all these people to have retained any appearance of being revolutionary, capitalism would have had to have turned out to be conveniently incapable of tolerating this economic reformism, despite the fact that it had no trouble tolerating the legalistic political expressions of the same reformism. The social democrats' scientific ideology confidently affirmed that capitalism could *not* tolerate these economic antagonisms; but history repeatedly proved them wrong.

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Bernstein, the social democrat least attached to political ideology and most openly attached to the methodology of bourgeois science, was honest enough to point out this contradiction (a contradiction which had also been implied by the reformist movement of the English workers, who

never bothered to invoke any revolutionary ideology). But it was historical development itself which ultimately provided the definitive demonstration. Although full of illusions in other regards, Bernstein had denied that a crisis of capitalist production would miraculously force the hand of the socialists, who wanted to inherit the revolution only by way of this orthodox sequence of events. The profound social upheaval touched off by World War I, though it led to a widespread awakening of radical consciousness, twice demonstrated that the social-democratic hierarchy had failed to provide the German workers with a revolutionary education capable of *turning them into theorists*: first, when the overwhelming majority of the party rallied to the imperialist war; then, following the German defeat, when the party crushed the Spartakist revolutionaries. The ex-worker Ebert, who had become one of the social-democratic leaders, apparently still believed in sin since he admitted that he hated revolution "like sin." And he proved himself a fitting precursor of the *socialist representation* that was soon to emerge as the mortal enemy of the proletariat in Russia and elsewhere, when he accurately summed up the essence of this new form of alienation: "Socialism means working a lot."

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As a Marxist thinker, Lenin was simply a faithful and consistent *Kautskyist* who

applied the *revolutionary ideology* of "orthodox Marxism" within the conditions existing in Russia, conditions which did not lend themselves to the reformist practice carried on elsewhere by the Second International. In the Russian context, the Bolshevik practice of directing the proletariat from outside, by means of a disciplined underground party under the control of intellectuals who had become "professional revolutionaries," became a new profession — a profession which refused to come to terms with any of the professional ruling strata of capitalist society (the Czarist political regime was in any case incapable of offering any opportunities for such compromise, which depends on an advanced stage of bourgeois power). As a result of this intransigence, the Bolsheviks ended up becoming the sole practitioners of the *profession of totalitarian social domination*.

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With the war and the collapse of international social democracy in the face of that war, the authoritarian ideological radicalism of the Bolsheviks was able to spread its influence all over the world. The bloody end of the democratic illusions of the workers movement transformed the entire world into a Russia, and Bolshevism, reigning over the first revolutionary breakthrough engendered by this period of crisis, offered its hierarchical and

ideological model to the proletariat of all countries, urging them to adopt it in order to “speak Russian” to their own ruling classes. Lenin did not reproach the Marxism of the Second International for being a revolutionary *ideology*, but for ceasing to be a *revolutionary* ideology.

100

The historical moment when Bolshevism triumphed *for itself* in Russia and social democracy fought victoriously *for the old world* marks the definitive inauguration of the state of affairs that is at the heart of the modern spectacle’s domination: the *representation of the working class* has become an *enemy* of the working class.

101

“In all previous revolutions,” wrote Rosa Luxemburg in *Die Rote Fahne* of 21 December 1918, “the combatants faced each other openly and directly — class against class, program against program. In the present revolution, the troops protecting the old order are not fighting under the insignia of the ruling class, but under the banner of a ‘social-democratic party.’ If the central question of revolution was posed openly and honestly — Capitalism or socialism? — the great mass of the proletariat would today have no doubts or hesitations.” Thus, a few days before its destruction, the radical current of the German proletariat discovered the secret of the new conditions

engendered by the whole process that had gone before (a development to which the representation of the working class had greatly contributed): the spectacular organization of the ruling order's defense, the social reign of appearances where no "central question" can any longer be posed "openly and honestly." The revolutionary representation of the proletariat had at this stage become both the primary cause and the central result of the general falsification of society.

102

The organization of the proletariat in accordance with the Bolshevik model resulted from the backwardness of Russia and from the abandonment of revolutionary struggle by the workers movements of the advanced countries. These same backward conditions also tended to foster the counterrevolutionary aspects which that form of organization had unconsciously contained from its inception. The repeated failure of the mass of the European workers movement to take advantage of the golden opportunities of the 1918-1920 period (a failure which included the violent destruction of its own radical minority) favored the consolidation of the Bolshevik development and enabled that fraudulent outcome to present itself to the world as the only possible proletarian solution. By seizing a state monopoly as sole representative and defender of working-class power, the

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Bolshevik Party justified itself and *became what it already was*: the party of the *owners of the proletariat*, owners who essentially eliminated earlier forms of property.

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For twenty years the various tendencies of Russian social democracy had engaged in an unresolved debate over all the conditions that might bear on the overthrow of Czarism — the weakness of the bourgeoisie; the preponderance of the peasant majority; and the potentially decisive role of a proletariat which was concentrated and combative but which constituted only a small minority of the population. This debate was eventually resolved in practice by a factor that had not figured in any of the hypotheses: a revolutionary bureaucracy that placed itself at the head of the proletariat, seized state power, and proceeded to impose a new form of class domination. A strictly bourgeois revolution had been impossible; talk of a “democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants” was meaningless verbiage; and the proletarian power of the soviets could not simultaneously maintain itself against the class of small landowners, against the national and international White reaction, and against its own representation which had become externalized and alienated in the form of a working-class party that maintained total control over the state, the economy, the means of expression, and soon even over people’s thoughts. Trotsky’s and

Parvus's theory of permanent revolution, which Lenin adopted in April 1917, was the only theory that proved true for countries with underdeveloped bourgeoisies; but even there it became true only after the unknown factor of bureaucratic class power came into the picture. In the numerous arguments within the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin was the most consistent advocate of concentrating dictatorial power in the hands of this supreme ideological representation. Lenin was right every time in the sense that he invariably supported the solution implied by earlier choices of the minority that now exercised absolute power: the democracy that was kept from peasants by means of the *state* would have to be kept from workers as well, which led to denying it to Communist union leaders and to party members in general, and finally to the highest ranks of the party hierarchy. At the Tenth Congress, as the Kronstadt soviet was being crushed by arms and buried under a barrage of slander, Lenin attacked the radical bureaucrats who had formed a "Workers' Opposition" faction with the following ultimatum, the logic of which Stalin would later extend to an absolute division of the world: "You can stand here with us, or against us out there with a gun in your hand, but not within some opposition. . . . We've had enough opposition."



After Kronstadt, the bureaucracy consolidated its power as sole owner of a system of *state capitalism* — internally by means of a temporary alliance with the peasantry (the “New Economic Policy”) and externally by using the workers regimented into the bureaucratic parties of the Third International as a backup force for Russian diplomacy, sabotaging the entire revolutionary movement and supporting bourgeois governments whose support it in turn hoped to secure in the sphere of international politics (the Kuomintang regime in the China of 1925-27, the Popular Fronts in Spain and France, etc.). The Russian bureaucracy then carried this consolidation of power to the next stage by subjecting the peasantry to a reign of terror, implementing the most brutal primitive accumulation of capital in history. The industrialization of the Stalin era revealed the bureaucracy’s ultimate function: continuing the reign of the economy by preserving the essence of market society, commodified labor. It also demonstrated the independence of the economy: the economy has come to dominate society so completely that it has proved capable of recreating the class domination it needs for its own continued operation; that is, the bourgeoisie has created an independent power that is capable of maintaining itself even without a bourgeoisie. The totalitarian bureaucracy was not “the last owning class in history” in Bruno Rizzi’s sense; it was merely a

*substitute ruling class* for the commodity economy. A tottering capitalist property system was replaced by a cruder version of itself — simplified, less diversified, and *concentrated* as the collective property of the bureaucratic class. This underdeveloped type of ruling class is also a reflection of economic underdevelopment, and it has no agenda beyond overcoming this underdevelopment in certain regions of the world. The hierarchical and statist framework for this crude remake of the capitalist ruling class was provided by the working-class party, which was itself modeled on the hierarchical separations of bourgeois organizations. As Ante Ciliga noted while in one of Stalin's prisons, "Technical questions of organization turned out to be social questions" (*Lenin and the Revolution*).

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Leninism was the highest voluntaristic expression of revolutionary ideology; it was a *coherence of the separate*, governing a reality that resisted it. With the advent of Stalinism, revolutionary ideology *returned to its fundamental incoherence*. At that point, ideology was no longer a weapon, it had become an end in itself. But a lie that can no longer be challenged becomes insane. The totalitarian ideological pronouncement obliterates reality as well as purpose; nothing exists but what it says exists. Although this crude form of the spectacle

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has been confined to certain underdeveloped regions, it has nevertheless played an essential role in the spectacle's global development. This particular materialization of ideology did not transform the world economically, as did advanced capitalism; it simply used police-state methods to transform people's *perception* of the world.

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The ruling totalitarian-ideological class is the ruler of a world turned upside down. The more powerful the class, the more it claims not to exist, and its power is employed above all to enforce this claim. It is modest only on this one point, however, because this officially nonexistent bureaucracy simultaneously attributes the crowning achievements of history to its own infallible leadership. Though its existence is everywhere in evidence, the bureaucracy must be *invisible as a class*. As a result, all social life becomes insane. The social organization of total falsehood stems from this fundamental contradiction.

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Stalinism was also a reign of terror *within* the bureaucratic class. The terrorism on which this class's power was based inevitably came to strike the class itself, because this class had no juridical legitimacy, no legally recognized status as an owning class which could be extended to each of its members. Its ownership had to be

masked because it was based on false consciousness. This false consciousness can maintain its total power only by means of a total reign of terror in which all real motives are ultimately obscured. The members of the ruling bureaucratic class have the right of ownership over society only collectively, as participants in a fundamental lie: they have to play the role of the proletariat governing a socialist society; they have to be actors faithful to a script of ideological betrayal. Yet they cannot actually participate in this counterfeit entity unless their legitimacy is validated. No bureaucrat can individually assert his right to power, because to prove himself a socialist proletarian he would have to demonstrate that he was the opposite of a bureaucrat, while to prove himself a bureaucrat is impossible because the bureaucracy's official line is that there is no bureaucracy. Each bureaucrat is thus totally dependent on the *central seal of legitimacy* provided by the ruling ideology, which validates the collective participation in its "socialist regime" of *all the bureaucrats it does not liquidate*. Although the bureaucrats are collectively empowered to make all social decisions, the cohesion of their own class can be ensured only by the concentration of their terrorist power in a single person. In this person resides the only practical truth of the ruling lie: the power to determine an unchallengeable boundary line which is nevertheless constantly being adjusted. Stalin decides without appeal who

is and who is not a member of the ruling bureaucracy — who should be considered a “proletarian in power” and who branded “a traitor in the pay of Wall Street and the Mikado.” The atomized bureaucrats can find their collective legitimacy only in the person of Stalin — the lord of the world who thus comes to see himself as the supreme being. “The lord of the world recognizes his own nature — omnipresent power — through the destructive violence he exerts against the contrastingly powerless selfhood of his subjects.” He is the power that defines the terrain of domination, and he is also “the power that *ravages* that terrain.”

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When ideology has become total through its possession of total power, and has changed from partial truth to totalitarian falsehood, historical thought has been so totally annihilated that history itself, even at the level of the most empirical knowledge, can no longer exist. Totalitarian bureaucratic society lives in a perpetual present in which whatever has previously happened is determined solely by its police. The project already envisioned by Napoleon of “monarchically controlling memory” has been realized in Stalinism’s constant rewriting of the past, which alters not only the interpretations of past events but even the events themselves. But the price paid for this liberation from all historical reality is the loss of the rational frame of reference

that is indispensable to capitalism as a *historical* social system. It is well known how much the scientific application of an ideology gone mad has cost the Russian economy (one need only recall the Lysenko fiasco). This contradiction — the fact that a totalitarian bureaucracy trying to administer an industrialized society is caught between its need for rationality and its repression of rationality — is also one of its main weaknesses in comparison with normal capitalist development. Just as the bureaucracy cannot resolve the question of agriculture as ordinary capitalism has done, it also proves inferior to the latter in the field of industrial production, because its unrealistic authoritarian planning is based on omnipresent falsifications.

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Between the two world wars the revolutionary working-class movement was destroyed by the joint action of the Stalinist bureaucracy and of fascist totalitarianism (the latter's organizational form having been inspired by the totalitarian party that had first been tested and developed in Russia). Fascism was a desperate attempt to defend the bourgeois economy from the dual threat of crisis and proletarian subversion, a *state of siege* in which capitalist society saved itself by giving itself an emergency dose of rationalization in the form of massive state intervention. But this rationalization is hampered by the extreme irrationality of its

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methods. Although fascism rallies to the defense of the main icons of a bourgeois ideology that has become conservative (family, private property, moral order, patriotism), while mobilizing the petty bourgeoisie and the unemployed workers who are panic-stricken by economic crisis or disillusioned by the socialist movement's failure to bring about a revolution, it is not itself fundamentally ideological. It presents itself as what it is — a violent resurrection of *myth* calling for participation in a community defined by archaic pseudovalues: race, blood, leader. Fascism is a *technologically equipped primitivism*. Its factitious mythological rehashes are presented in the spectacular context of the most modern means of conditioning and illusion. It is thus a significant factor in the formation of the modern spectacle, and its role in the destruction of the old working-class movement also makes it one of the founding forces of present-day society. But since it is also the most *costly* method of preserving the capitalist order, it has generally ended up being replaced by the major capitalist states, which represent stronger and more rational forms of that order.

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When the Russian bureaucracy has finally succeeded in doing away with the vestiges of bourgeois property that hampered its rule over the economy, and in developing this

economy for its own purposes, and in being recognized as a member of the club of great powers, it wants to enjoy its world in peace and to disencumber itself from the arbitrariness to which it is still subjected. It thus denounces the Stalinism at its origin. But this denunciation remains Stalinist — arbitrary, unexplained, and subject to continual modification — because *the ideological lie at its origin can never be revealed*. The bureaucracy cannot liberalize itself either culturally or politically because its existence as a class depends on its ideological monopoly, which, for all its cumbersomeness, is its sole title to power. This ideology has lost the passion of its original expression, but its passionless routinization still has the repressive function of controlling all thought and prohibiting any competition whatsoever. The bureaucracy is thus helplessly tied to an ideology that is no longer believed by anyone. The power that used to inspire terror now inspires ridicule, but this ridiculed power still defends itself with the threat of resorting to the terrorizing force it would like to be rid of. Thus, at the very time when the bureaucracy hopes to demonstrate its superiority on the terrain of capitalism it reveals itself to be a *poor cousin* of capitalism. Just as its actual history contradicts its façade of legality and its crudely maintained ignorance contradicts its scientific pretensions, so its attempt to vie with the bourgeoisie in the production of



commodity abundance is stymied by the fact that such abundance contains *its own implicit ideology*, and is generally accompanied by the freedom to choose from an unlimited range of spectacular pseudoalternatives — a pseudofreedom that remains incompatible with the bureaucracy's ideology.

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The bureaucracy's ideological title to power is already collapsing at the international level. The power that established itself nationally in the name of an ostensibly internationalist perspective is now forced to recognize that it can no longer impose its system of lies beyond its own national borders. The unequal economic development of diverse bureaucracies with competing interests that have succeeded in establishing their own "socialism" in more than one country has led to an all-out public confrontation between the Russian lie and the Chinese lie. From this point on, each bureaucracy in power will have to find its own way; and the same is true for each of the totalitarian parties aspiring to such power (notably those that still survive from the Stalinist period among certain national working classes). This international collapse has been further aggravated by the expressions of internal negation which first became visible to the outside world when the workers of East Berlin revolted against the bureaucrats and demanded a

“government of steel workers” — a negation which has in one case already gone to the point of sovereign workers councils in Hungary. But in the final analysis, this crumbling of the global alliance of pseudosocialist bureaucracies is also a most unfavorable development for the future of capitalist society. The bourgeoisie is in the process of losing the adversary that objectively supported it by providing an illusory unification of all opposition to the existing order. This division of labor between two mutually reinforcing forms of the spectacle comes to an end when the pseudorevolutionary role in turn divides. The spectacular component of the destruction of the worker-class movement is itself headed for destruction.

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The only current partisans of the Leninist illusion are the various Trotskyist tendencies, which stubbornly persist in identifying the proletarian project with an ideologically based hierarchical organization despite all the historical experiences that have refuted that perspective. The distance that separates Trotskyism from a revolutionary critique of present-day society is related to the respectful distance the Trotskyists maintain regarding positions that were already mistaken when they were acted on in real struggles. Trotsky remained fundamentally loyal to the upper bureaucracy until 1927, while striving to

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gain control of it so as to make it resume a genuinely Bolshevik foreign policy. (It is well known, for example, that in order to help conceal Lenin's famous "Testament" he went so far as to slanderously disavow his own supporter Max Eastman, who had made it public.) Trotsky was doomed by his basic perspective, because once the bureaucracy became aware that it had evolved into a counterrevolutionary class on the domestic front, it was bound to opt for a *similarly counterrevolutionary role* in other countries (though still, of course, in the name of revolution). Trotsky's subsequent efforts to create a Fourth International reflect the same inconsistency. Once he had become an unconditional partisan of the Bolshevik form of organization (which he did during the second Russian revolution), he refused for the rest of his life to recognize that the bureaucracy was a new ruling class. When Lukács, in 1923, presented this same organizational form as the long-sought link between theory and practice, in which proletarians cease being mere "spectators" of the events that occur in their organization and begin consciously choosing and experiencing those events, he was describing as merits of the Bolshevik Party everything that that party was *not*. Despite his profound theoretical work, Lukács remained an ideologue, speaking in the name of the power that was most grossly alien to the proletarian movement, yet believing and giving his audience to believe

that he found himself *completely at home with it*. As subsequent events demonstrated how that power disavows and suppresses its lackeys, Lukács's endless self-repudiations revealed with caricatural clarity that he had identified with the *total opposite* of himself and of everything he had argued for in *History and Class Consciousness*. No one better than Lukács illustrates the validity of the fundamental rule for assessing all the intellectuals of this century: What they *respect* is a precise gauge of their own *degradation*. Yet Lenin had hardly encouraged these sorts of illusions about his activities. On the contrary, he acknowledged that "a political party cannot examine its members to see if there are contradictions between their philosophy and the party program." The party whose idealized portrait Lukács had so inopportunistically drawn was in reality suited for only one very specific and limited task: the seizure of state power.

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Since the neo-Leninist illusion carried on by present-day Trotskyism is constantly being contradicted by the reality of modern capitalist societies (both bourgeois and bureaucratic), it is not surprising that it gets its most favorable reception in the nominally independent "underdeveloped" countries, where the local ruling classes' versions of bureaucratic state socialism end up amounting to little more than a mere

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*ideology of economic development.* The hybrid composition of these ruling classes is more or less clearly related to their position within the bourgeois-bureaucratic spectrum. Their international maneuvering between those two poles of capitalist power, along with their numerous ideological compromises (notably with Islam) stemming from their heterogeneous social bases, end up removing from these degraded versions of ideological socialism everything serious except the police. One type of bureaucracy establishes itself by forging an organization capable of combining national struggle with agrarian peasant revolt; it then, as in China, tends to apply the Stalinist model of industrialization in societies that are even less developed than Russia was in 1917. A bureaucracy able to industrialize the nation may also develop out of the petty bourgeoisie, with power being seized by army officers, as happened in Egypt. In other situations, such as the aftermath of the Algerian war of independence, a bureaucracy that has established itself as a para-state authority in the course of struggle may seek a stabilizing compromise by merging with a weak national bourgeoisie. Finally, in the former colonies of black Africa that remain openly tied to the American and European bourgeoisie, a local bourgeoisie constitutes itself (usually based on the power of traditional tribal chiefs) *through its possession of the state.* Foreign imperialism remains the real master of the

economy of these countries, but at a certain stage its native agents are rewarded for their sale of local products by being granted possession of a local state — a state that is independent from the local masses but not from imperialism. Incapable of accumulating capital, this artificial bourgeoisie does nothing but *squander* the surplus value it extracts from local labor and the subsidies it receives from protector states and international monopolies. Because of the obvious inability of these bourgeois classes to fulfill the normal economic functions of a bourgeoisie, they soon find themselves challenged by oppositional movements based on the bureaucratic model (more or less adapted to particular local conditions). But if such bureaucracies succeed in their fundamental project of industrialization, they produce the historical conditions for their own defeat: by accumulating capital they also accumulate a proletariat, thus creating their own negation in countries where that negation had not previously existed.

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In the course of this complex and terrible evolution which has brought the era of class struggles to a new set of conditions, the proletariat of the industrial countries has lost its ability to assert its own independent perspective. In a fundamental sense, it has also lost *its illusions*. But it has not lost its being. The proletariat has not been

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eliminated. It remains irreducibly present within the intensified alienation of modern capitalism. It consists of that vast majority of workers who have lost all power over their lives and who, *once they become aware of this*, redefine themselves as the proletariat, the force working to negate this society from within. This proletariat is being objectively reinforced by the virtual elimination of the peasantry and by the increasing degree to which the "service" sectors and intellectual professions are being subjected to factorylike working conditions. *Subjectively*, however, this proletariat is still far removed from any practical class consciousness, and this goes not only for white-collar workers but also for blue-collar workers, who have yet to become aware of any perspective beyond the impotence and mystifications of the old politics. But when this proletariat discovers that its own externalized power contributes to the constant reinforcement of capitalist society, no longer only in the form of its alienated labor but also in the form of the trade unions, political parties, and state powers that it had created in the effort to liberate itself, it also discovers through concrete historical experience that it is the class that must totally oppose all rigidified externalizations and all specializations of power. It bears *a revolution that cannot leave anything outside itself*, a revolution embodying the permanent domination of the present over the past and a total critique of separation; and it must discover the

appropriate forms of action to carry out this revolution. No quantitative amelioration of its impoverishment, no illusory participation in a hierarchized system, can provide a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, because the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in any particular wrong it has suffered, nor in *the righting of any particular wrong*. It cannot recognize itself even in the righting of many such wrongs, but only in the righting of the *absolute wrong* of being excluded from any real life.

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New signs of negation are proliferating in the most economically advanced countries. Although these signs are misunderstood and falsified by the spectacle, they are sufficient proof that a new period has begun. We have already seen the failure of the first proletarian assault against capitalism; now we are witnessing *the failure of capitalist abundance*. On one hand, anti-union struggles of Western workers are being repressed first of all by the unions; on the other, rebellious youth are raising new protests, protests which are still vague and confused but which clearly imply a rejection of art, of everyday life, and of the old specialized politics. These are two sides of a new spontaneous struggle that is at first taking on a *criminal* appearance. They foreshadow a second proletarian assault against class society. As the lost children of this as yet immobile army reappear on this

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battleground — a battleground which has changed and yet remains the same — they are following a new “General Ludd” who, this time, urges them to attack the *machinery of permitted consumption*.

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“The long-sought political form through which the working class could carry out its own economic liberation” has taken on a clear shape in this century, in the form of revolutionary workers councils which assume all decisionmaking and executive powers and which federate with each other by means of delegates who are answerable to their base and revocable at any moment. The councils that have actually emerged have as yet provided no more than a rough hint of their possibilities because they have immediately been opposed and defeated by class society’s various defensive forces, among which their own false consciousness must often be included. As Pannekoek rightly stressed, opting for the power of workers councils “poses problems” rather than providing a solution. But it is precisely within this form of social organization that the problems of proletarian revolution can find their real solution. This is the terrain where the objective preconditions of historical consciousness are brought together — the terrain where *active* direct communication is realized, marking the end of specialization, hierarchy and separation, and the transformation of existing conditions

into "conditions of unity." In this process proletarian subjects can emerge from their struggle against their contemplative position; their consciousness is equal to the practical organization they have chosen for themselves because this consciousness has become inseparable from coherent intervention in history.

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With the power of the councils — a power that must internationally supplant all other forms of power — the proletarian movement becomes its own product. This product is nothing other than the producers themselves, whose goal has become nothing other than their own fulfillment. Only in this way can the spectacle's negation of life be negated in its turn.

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The appearance of workers councils during the first quarter of this century was the most advanced expression of the old proletarian movement, but it went unnoticed, except in travestied forms, because it was repressed and destroyed along with all the rest of the movement. Now, from the vantage point of the new stage of proletarian critique, the councils can be seen in their true light as the only undefeated aspect of a defeated movement. The historical consciousness that recognizes that the councils are the only terrain in which it can thrive can now see that they are no longer at the periphery of a

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movement that is subsiding, but at the center of a movement that is rising.

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A revolutionary organization that exists before the establishment of the power of workers councils must discover its own appropriate form through struggle; but all these historical experiences have already made it clear that it cannot claim to *represent* the working class. Its task, rather, is to embody a radical separation from *the world of separation*.

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Revolutionary organization is the coherent expression of the theory of praxis entering into two-way communication with practical struggles, in the process of becoming practical theory. Its own practice is to foster the communication and coherence of these struggles. At the revolutionary moment when social separations are dissolved, the organization must dissolve itself as a separate organization.

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A revolutionary organization must constitute an integral critique of society, that is, it must make a comprehensive critique of all aspects of alienated social life while refusing to compromise with any form of separate power anywhere in the world. In the organization's struggle with class society, *the combattants themselves* are the

fundamental weapons: a revolutionary organization must thus see to it that the dominant society's conditions of separation and hierarchy are not reproduced within itself. It must constantly struggle against its deformation by the ruling spectacle. The only limit to participation in its total democracy is that each of its members must have recognized and appropriated the coherence of the organization's critique — a coherence that must be demonstrated both in the critical theory as such and in the relation between that theory and practical activity.

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As capitalism's ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment, putting them in the position of having to reject that impoverishment *in its totality or not at all*, revolutionary organization has had to learn that it can no longer *combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle*.

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Proletarian revolution depends entirely on the condition that, for the first time, theory as understanding of human practice be recognized and lived by the masses. It requires that workers become dialecticians and put their thought into practice. It thus demands of its "people without qualities"

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more than the bourgeois revolution demanded of the qualified individuals it delegated to carry out its tasks (because the partial ideological consciousness created by a segment of the bourgeois class was based on the economy, that central *part* of social life in which that class was *already in power*). The development of class society to the stage of the spectacular organization of nonlife is thus leading the revolutionary project to become *visibly* what it has always been *in essence*.

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Revolutionary theory is now the enemy of all revolutionary ideology, *and it knows it*.

## CHAPTER 5: TIME AND HISTORY

*O, gentlemen, the time of life is short! . . .  
An if we live, we live to tread on kings.*  
—Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*

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Man, “the negative being who *is* solely to the extent that he suppresses Being,” is one with time. Man’s appropriation of his own nature is at the same time his grasp of the development of the universe. “History is itself a real part of *natural history*, of the transformation of nature into man” (Marx). Conversely, this “natural history” has no real existence other than through the process of human history, the only vantage point from which one can take in that historical totality (like the modern telescope whose power enables one to look back *in time* at the receding nebulas at the periphery of the universe). History has always existed, but not always in its historical form. The temporalization of humanity, brought about through the mediation of a society, amounts to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time becomes manifest and *true* within historical consciousness.

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True (though *still hidden*) historical movement begins with the slow and imperceptible development of the “real nature of man” — the “nature that is born

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with human history, out of the generative action of human society." But even when such a society has developed a technology and a language and is already a product of its own history, it is conscious only of a perpetual present. Knowledge is carried on only by the *living*, never going beyond the memory of the society's oldest members. Neither death nor procreation is understood as a law of time. Time remains motionless, like an enclosed space. When a more complex society finally becomes conscious of time, it tries to negate it — it views time not as something that passes, but as something that *returns*. This static type of society organizes time in a *cyclical* manner, in accordance with its own direct experience of nature.

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Cyclical time is already dominant among the nomadic peoples because they find the same conditions repeated at each moment of their journey. As Hegel notes, "the wandering of nomads is only nominal because it is limited to uniform spaces." When a society settles in a particular location and gives space a content by developing distinctive areas within it, it finds itself confined within that locality. The periodic return to similar places now becomes the pure return of time in the same place, the repetition of a sequence of activities. The transition from pastoral nomadism to sedentary agriculture marks the end of an idle and contentless freedom

and the beginning of labor. The agrarian mode of production, governed by the rhythm of the seasons, is the basis for fully developed cyclical time. Eternity is *within* this time, it is the return of the same here on earth. Myth is the unitary mental construct which guarantees that the cosmic order conforms with the order that this society has in fact already established within its frontiers.

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The social appropriation of time and the production of man by human labor develop within a society divided into classes. The power that establishes itself above the poverty of the society of cyclical time, the class that organizes this social labor and appropriates its limited surplus value, simultaneously appropriates the *temporal surplus value* resulting from its organization of social time: it alone possesses the irreversible time of the living. The wealth that can only be concentrated in the hands of the rulers and spent in extravagant festivities is also spent as a squandering of *historical time at the surface of society*. The owners of this historical surplus value are the only ones in a position to know and enjoy real events. Separated from the collective organization of time associated with the repetitive production at the base of social life, this historical time flows independently above its own static community. This is the time of adventure and war, the time in which

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the masters of cyclical society pursue their personal histories; it is also the time that emerges in the clashes with foreign communities that disrupt the unchanging social order. History thus arises as something alien to people, as something they never sought and from which they had thought themselves protected. But it also revives the negative human *restlessness* that had been at the very origin of this whole (temporarily suspended) development.

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In itself, cyclical time is a time without conflict. But conflict is already present even in this infancy of time, as history first struggles to become history in the practical activity of the masters. This history creates a surface irreversibility; its movement constitutes the very time it uses up within the inexhaustible time of cyclical society.

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"Static societies" are societies that have reduced their historical movement to a minimum and that have managed to maintain their internal conflicts and their conflicts with the natural and human environment in a constant equilibrium. Although the extraordinary diversity of the institutions established for this purpose bears eloquent testimony to the flexibility of human nature's self-creation, this diversity is apparent only to the external observer, the anthropologist who *looks back* from the

vantage point of historical time. In each of these societies a definitive organizational structure has eliminated any possibility of change. The total conformism of their social practices, with which all human possibilities are identified for all time, has no external limit but the fear of falling back into a formless animal condition. The members of these societies remain human at the price of always remaining the same.

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With the emergence of political power — which seems to be associated with the last great technological revolutions (such as iron smelting) at the threshold of a period that would experience no further major upheavals until the rise of modern industry — kinship ties begin to dissolve. The succession of generations within a natural, purely cyclical time begins to be replaced by a linear succession of powers and events. This irreversible time is the time of those who rule, and the dynasty is its first unit of measurement. Writing is the rulers' weapon. In writing, language attains its complete independence as a mediation between consciousnesses. But this independence coincides with the independence of separate power, the mediation that shapes society. With writing there appears a consciousness that is no longer carried and transmitted directly among the living — an *impersonal memory*, the memory of the administration

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of society. "Writings are the thoughts of the state; archives are its memory" (Novalis).

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The chronicle is the expression of the irreversible time of power. It also serves to inspire the continued progression of that time by recording the past out of which it has developed, since this orientation of time tends to collapse with the fall of each particular power and would otherwise sink back into the indifferent oblivion of cyclical time (the only time known to the peasant masses who, during the rise and fall of all the empires and their chronologies, never change). The *owners of history* have given time a *direction*, a direction which is also a *meaning*. But this history develops and perishes separately, leaving the underlying society unchanged, because it remains separated from the common reality. This is why we tend to reduce the history of Oriental empires to a history of religions: the chronologies that have fallen to ruins have left nothing but the seemingly independent history of the illusions that veiled them. The masters who used the protection of myth to *make history their private property* did so first of all in the realm of illusion. In China and Egypt, for example, they long held a monopoly on the immortality of the soul; and their earliest officially recognized dynasties were nothing but imaginary reconstructions of the past. But this illusory ownership by the masters

was the only ownership then possible, both of the common history and of their own history. As their real historical power expanded, this illusory-mythical ownership became increasingly vulgarized. All these consequences flowed from the simple fact that as the masters played the role of mythically guaranteeing the permanence of cyclical time (as in the seasonal rites performed by the Chinese emperors), they themselves achieved a relative liberation from cyclical time.

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The dry, unexplained chronology that a deified authority offered to its subjects, who were supposed to accept it as the earthly fulfillment of mythic commandments, was destined to be transcended and transformed into conscious history. But for this to happen, sizeable groups of people had to have experienced real participation in history. Out of this practical communication between those who have *recognized each other* as possessors of a unique present, who have experienced a qualitative richness of events in their own activity and who are at home in their own era, arises the general language of historical communication. Those for whom irreversible time truly exists discover in it both the *memorable* and the *threat of oblivion*: "Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents the results of his researches, so that time will not abolish the deeds of men..."

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Examining history amounts to *examining the nature of power*. Greece was the moment when power and changes in power were first debated and understood. It was a *democracy of the masters* of society — a total contrast to the despotic state, where power settles accounts only with itself, within the impenetrable obscurity of its inner sanctum, by means of *palace revolutions* which are beyond the pale of discussion whether they fail or succeed. But the shared power in the Greek communities was limited to the *consumption* of a social life whose *production* remained the separate and static domain of the servile class. The only people who lived were those who did not work. The divisions among the Greek communities and their struggles to exploit foreign cities were the externalized expression of the principle of separation on which each of them was based internally. Although Greece had dreamed of universal history, it did not succeed in unifying itself in the face of foreign invasion, or even in unifying the calendars of its independent city-states. Historical time became conscious in Greece, but it was not yet conscious of itself.

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The disappearance of the particular conditions that had favored the Greek communities brought about a regression of Western historical thought, but it did not

lead to a restoration of the old mythic structures. The clashes of the Mediterranean peoples and the rise and fall of the Roman state gave rise instead to *semihistorical religions*, which became a new armor for separate power and basic components of a new consciousness of time.

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The monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history, between the cyclical time that still governed the sphere of production and the irreversible time that was the theater of conflicts and regroupings among different peoples. The religions that evolved out of Judaism were abstract universal acknowledgments of an irreversible time that had become democratized and open to all, but only in the realm of illusion. Time is totally oriented toward a single final event: "The Kingdom of God is soon to come." These religions were rooted in the soil of history, but they remained radically opposed to history. The semihistorical religions establish a qualitative point of departure in time (the birth of Christ, the flight of Mohammed), but their irreversible time — introducing an accumulation that would take the form of conquest in Islam and of increasing capital in Reformation Christianity — is inverted in religious thought and becomes a sort of *countdown*: waiting for time to run out before the Last Judgment and the advent of the other, true world. Eternity has emerged

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from cyclical time, as something beyond it. It is also the element that restrains the irreversibility of time, suppressing history within history itself by positioning itself *on the other side of irreversible time* as a pure point into which cyclical time returns and disappears. Bossuet will still say: "By way of time, which passes, we enter eternity, which does not pass."

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The Middle Ages, an incomplete mythical world whose consummation lay outside itself, is the period when cyclical time, though still governing the major part of production, really begins to be undermined by history. An element of irreversible time is recognized in the successive stages of each individual's life. Life is seen as a one-way *journey* through a world whose meaning lies elsewhere: the *pilgrim* is the person who leaves cyclical time behind and actually becomes the traveler that everyone else is symbolically. Personal historical life still finds its fulfillment within the sphere of power, whether in struggles waged by power or in struggles over disputed power; but power's irreversible time is now shared to an unlimited degree due to the general unity brought about by the oriented time of the Christian Era — a world of *armed faith*, where the adventures of the masters revolve around fealty and disputes over who owes fealty to whom. Feudal society was born from the merging of "the organizational

structures of the conquering armies that developed in the process of conquest" with "the productive forces found in the conquered regions" (*The German Ideology*), and the factors contributing to the organization of those productive forces include the religious language in which they were expressed. Social domination was divided between the Church and the state, the latter power being in turn subdivided in the complex relations of suzerainty and vassalage within and between rural domains and urban communities. This diversification of potential historical life reflected the gradual emergence (following the failure of that great official enterprise of the medieval world, the Crusades) of the era's unnoticed innovation: the irreversible time that was silently undermining the society, the time experienced by the bourgeoisie in the production of commodities, the foundation and expansion of cities, and the commercial discovery of the planet — a practical experimentation that destroyed any mythical organization of the cosmos once and for all.

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With the waning of the Middle Ages, the irreversible time that had invaded society was experienced by a consciousness still attached to the old order as an obsession with death. This was the melancholy of a world passing away, the last world where the security of myth still counterbalanced history; and for this melancholy all earthly

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things move inevitably toward decay. The great European peasant revolts were also an attempt to *respond to history* — a history that was violently wresting the peasants from the patriarchal slumber that had been imposed by their feudal guardians. The millenarians' utopian aspiration of *creating heaven on earth* revived a dream that had been at the origin of the semihistorical religions, when the early Christian communities, like the Judaic messianism from which they sprung, responded to the troubles and misfortunes of their time by envisioning the imminent realization of the Kingdom of God, thereby adding an element of unrest and subversion to ancient society. When Christianity reached the point of sharing power within the empire, it denounced whatever still remained of this hope as mere superstition. This is what St. Augustine was doing when, in a formula that can be seen as the archetype of all the modern ideological apologetics, he declared that the Kingdom of God had in fact already come long ago — that it was nothing other than the established Church. The social revolts of the millenarian peasantry naturally began by defining their goal as the overthrow of that Church. But millenarianism developed in a historical world, not on the terrain of myth. Modern revolutionary expectations are not irrational continuations of the religious passion of millenarianism, as Norman Cohn thought he had demonstrated in *The Pursuit of the*

*Millennium.* On the contrary, millenarianism, revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, was already a modern revolutionary tendency, a tendency that lacked only the consciousness that it was a *purely historical movement*. The millenarians were doomed to defeat because they were unable to recognize their revolution as their own undertaking. The fact that they hesitated to act until they had received some external sign of God's will was an ideological corollary to the insurgent peasants' practice of following leaders from outside their own ranks. The peasant class could not attain a clear understanding of the workings of society or of how to conduct its own struggle, and because it lacked these conditions for unifying its action and consciousness, it expressed its project and waged its wars with the imagery of an earthly paradise.

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The Renaissance was a joyous break with eternity. Though seeking its heritage and legitimacy in the ancient world, it represented a new form of historical life. Its irreversible time was that of a never-ending accumulation of knowledge, and the historical consciousness engendered by the experience of democratic communities and of the forces that destroy them now took up once again, with Machiavelli, the analysis of secularized power, saying the previously

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unsayable about the state. In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the creation of festivals, life is experienced as an enjoyment of the passage of time. But this enjoyment of transience is itself transient. The song of Lorenzo de' Medici, which Burckhardt considered "the very spirit of the Renaissance," is the eulogy this fragile historical festival delivers on itself: "How beautiful the spring of life — and how quickly it vanishes."

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The constant tendency toward the monopolization of historical life by the absolute-monarchist state — a transitional form on the way to complete domination by the bourgeois class — brings into clear view the nature of the bourgeoisie's new type of irreversible time. The bourgeoisie is associated with a *labor time* that has finally been freed from cyclical time. With the bourgeoisie, work becomes *work that transforms historical conditions*. The bourgeoisie is the first ruling class for which work is a value. And the bourgeoisie, which suppresses all privilege and recognizes no value that does not stem from the exploitation of labor, has appropriately identified its own value as a ruling class with labor, and has made the progress of labor the measure of its own progress. The class that accumulates commodities and capital continually modifies nature by modifying labor itself, by unleashing labor's

productivity. At the stage of absolute monarchy, all social life was already concentrated within the ornamented poverty of the Court, the gaudy trappings of a bleak state administration whose apex was the “profession of king”; and all particular historical freedoms had to surrender to this new power. The free play of the feudal lords’ irreversible time came to an end in their last, lost battles — in the Fronde and in the Scottish uprising in support of Bonny Prince Charlie. The world now had a new foundation.

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The victory of the bourgeoisie is the victory of a *profoundly historical* time, because it is the time corresponding to an economic production that continuously transforms society from top to bottom. So long as agrarian production remains the predominant form of labor, the cyclical time that remains at the base of society reinforces the joint forces of *tradition*, which tend to hold back any historical movement. But the irreversible time of the bourgeois economy eradicates these vestiges throughout the world. History, which until then had seemed to involve only the actions of individual members of the ruling class, and which had thus been recorded as a mere chronology of events, is now understood as a *general movement* — a relentless movement that crushes any individuals in its path. By discovering its basis in political economy,

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history becomes aware of what had previously been unconscious; but this basis remains unconscious because it cannot be brought to light. This blind prehistory, this new fate that no one controls, is the only thing that the commodity economy has democratized.

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The history that is present in all the depths of society tends to become invisible at the surface. The triumph of irreversible time is also its metamorphosis into a *time of things*, because the weapon that brought about its victory was the mass production of objects in accordance with the laws of the commodity. The main product that economic development has transformed from a luxurious rarity to a commonly consumed item is thus history itself — but only in the form of the history of the abstract movement of things that dominates all qualitative aspects of life. While the earlier cyclical time had supported an increasing degree of historical time lived by individuals and groups, the irreversible time of production tends to socially eliminate such lived time.

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The bourgeoisie has thus made irreversible historical time known and has imposed it on society, but it has prevented society from *using* it. "History once existed, but not any longer," because the class of owners of the economy, which is inextricably tied to

*economic history*, must repress every other irreversible use of time because it is directly threatened by them all. The ruling class, made up of *specialists in the possession of things* who are themselves therefore possessed by things, is forced to link its fate with the preservation of this reified history, that is, with the preservation of a new immobility *within history*. Meanwhile the worker at the base of society is for the first time not materially *estranged from history*, because the irreversible movement is now generated from that base. By demanding to *live* the historical time that it produces, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and each previously defeated attempt to carry out this project represents a possible point of departure for a new historical life.

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The irreversible time of the bourgeoisie that had just seized power was at first called by its own name and assigned an absolute origin: Year One of the Republic. But the revolutionary ideology of general freedom that had served to overthrow the last remnants of a myth-based ordering of values, along with all the traditional forms of social organization, was already unable to completely conceal the real goal that it had draped in Roman costume: unrestricted *freedom of trade*. Commodity society, discovering its need to restore the passivity

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that it had so profoundly shaken in order to establish its own unchallenged rule, now found that, for its purposes, "Christianity with its cult of man in the abstract . . . is the most fitting form of religion" (*Capital*). The bourgeoisie thus entered into a compromise with that religion, a compromise reflected in its presentation of time: the Revolutionary calendar was abandoned and irreversible time returned to the straitjacket of a duly extended *Christian Era*.

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With the development of capitalism, irreversible time has become *globally unified*. Universal history becomes a reality because the entire world is brought under the sway of this time's development. But this history that is everywhere simultaneously the same is as yet nothing but an intrahistorical rejection of history. What appears the world over as *the same day* is merely the time of economic production, time cut up into equal abstract fragments. This unified irreversible time belongs to the *global market*, and thus also to the global spectacle.

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The irreversible time of production is first of all the measure of commodities. The time officially recognized throughout the world as the *general time of society* actually only reflects the specialized interests that

constitute it, and thus is *merely one particular type of time*.



## CHAPTER 6: SPECTACULAR TIME

*"We have nothing of our own except time, which even the homeless can experience."*

—Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*

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The time of production — commodified time — is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract, in which each segment need only demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all the others. It has no reality apart from its *exchangeability*. Under the social reign of commodified time, "time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most the carcass of time" (*The Poverty of Philosophy*). This devalued time is the complete opposite of time as "terrain of human development."

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The general time of human nondevelopment also has a complementary aspect — a *consumable* form of time based on the present mode of production and presenting itself in everyday life as a *pseudocyclical time*.

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This pseudocyclical time is in fact merely a *consumable disguise* of the production system's commodified time. It exhibits the latter's essential traits: homogenous

exchangeable units and suppression of any qualitative dimension. But as a by-product of commodified time whose function is to promote and maintain the backwardness of everyday life, it is loaded with pseudovalorizations and manifests itself as a succession of pseudoindividualized moments.

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Pseudocyclical time is associated with the consumption of modern economic survival — the augmented survival in which everyday experience is cut off from decisionmaking and subjected no longer to the natural order, but to the pseudonature created by alienated labor. It is thus quite natural that it echoes the old cyclical rhythm that governed survival in preindustrial societies, incorporating the natural vestiges of cyclical time while generating new variants: day and night, work and weekend, periodic vacations.

## 151

Pseudocyclical time is a time that has been *transformed by industry*. The time based on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity, one that recombines everything that the disintegration of the old unitary societies had differentiated into private life, economic life, and political life. The entire consumable time of modern society ends up being treated as a raw material for various new products put on the market as socially

controlled uses of time. "A product that already exists in a form suitable for consumption may nevertheless serve as raw material for some other product" (*Capital*).

## 152

In its most advanced sectors, concentrated capitalism is increasingly tending to market "fully equipped" blocks of time, each functioning as a unified commodity combining a variety of other commodities. In the expanding economy of "services" and leisure activities, the payment for these blocks of time is equally unified: "everything's included," whether it is a matter of spectacular living environments, touristic pseudotravel, subscriptions to cultural consumption, or even the sale of sociability itself in the form of "exciting conversations" and "meetings with celebrities." Spectacular commodities of this type, which would obviously never sell were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody, just as obviously reflect the modernization of sales techniques by being payable on credit.

## 153

Consumable pseudocyclical time is spectacular time, both in the narrow sense as time spent consuming images and in the broader sense as image of the consumption of time. The time spent consuming images (images which in turn serve to publicize all the other commodities) is both the particular

terrain where the spectacle's mechanisms are most fully implemented and the general goal that those mechanisms present, the focus and epitome of all particular consumptions. Thus, the time that modern society is constantly seeking to "save" by increasing transportation speeds or using packaged soups ends up being spent by the average American in watching television three to six hours a day. As for the social image of the consumption of time, it is exclusively dominated by leisure time and vacations — moments portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, *at a distance* and as desirable by definition. These commodified moments are explicitly presented as moments of real life whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to. But all that is really happening is that the spectacle is displaying and reproducing itself at a higher level of intensity. What is presented as true life turns out to be merely a more *truly spectacular* life.

## 154

Although the present age presents itself as a series of frequently recurring festivities, it is an age that knows nothing of real festivals. The moments within cyclical time when members of a community joined together in a luxurious expenditure of life are impossible for a society that lacks both community and luxury. Its vulgarized pseudofestivals are parodies of real dialogue

and gift-giving; they may incite waves of excessive economic spending, but they lead to nothing but disillusionments, which can be compensated only by the promise of some new disillusion to come. The less use value is present in the time of modern survival, the more highly it is exalted in the spectacle. The reality of time has been replaced by the *publicity* of time.

### **155**

While the consumption of cyclical time in ancient societies was consistent with the real labor of those societies, the pseudocyclical consumption of developed economies contradicts the abstract irreversible time implicit in their system of production. Cyclical time was the really lived time of unchanging illusions. Spectacular time is the illusorily lived time of a constantly changing reality.

### **156**

The production process's constant innovations are not echoed in consumption, which only consists of more and more of the same. Because dead labor continues to dominate living labor, in spectacular time the past continues to dominate the present.

### **157**

The lack of general historical life also means that individual life as yet has no history. The pseudo-events that vie for attention in spectacular dramatizations have not been

lived by those who are informed about them; and in any case they are soon forgotten due to their increasingly frenetic replacement at every pulsation of the spectacular machinery. Conversely, what is really lived has no relation to the society's official version of irreversible time, and is directly opposed to the pseudocyclical rhythm of that time's consumable by-products. This individual experience of a disconnected everyday life remains without language, without concepts, and without critical access to its own past, which has nowhere been recorded. Uncommunicated, misunderstood and forgotten, it is smothered by the spectacle's false memory of the unmemorable.

## **158**

The spectacle, considered as the reigning society's method for paralyzing history and memory and for suppressing any history based on historical time, represents a *false consciousness of time*.

## **159**

In order to force the workers into the status of "free" producers and consumers of commodified time, it was first necessary to *violently expropriate their time*. The imposition of the new spectacular form of time became possible only after this initial dispossession of the producers.

## **160**

The unavoidable biological limitations of the work force — evident both in its dependence on the natural cycle of sleeping and waking and in the debilitating effects of irreversible time over each individual's lifetime — are treated by the modern production system as strictly *secondary* considerations. As such, they are ignored in that system's official proclamations and in the consumable trophies that embody its relentless triumphant progress. Fixated on the delusory center around which his world seems to move, the spectator no longer experiences life as a journey toward fulfillment and toward death. Once he has given up on really living he can no longer acknowledge his own death. Life insurance ads merely insinuate that he may be guilty of dying without having provided for the smooth continuation of the system following the resultant economic loss, while the promoters of the "American way of death" stress his capacity to preserve most of the *appearances* of life in his post-mortem state. On all the other fronts of advertising bombardment it is strictly forbidden to grow old. Everybody is urged to economize on their "youth-capital," though such capital, however carefully managed, has little prospect of attaining the durable and cumulative properties of economic capital. This social absence of death coincides with the social absence of life.

As Hegel showed, time is the *necessary* alienation, the terrain where the subject realizes himself by losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself. In total contrast, the current form of alienation is imposed on the producers of an *estranged present*. In this *spatial alienation*, the society that radically separates the subject from the activity it steals from him is in reality separating him from his own time. This potentially surmountable social alienation is what has prevented and paralyzed the possibilities and risks of a *living* alienation within time.

## 162

Behind the *fashions* that come and go on the frivolous surface of the spectacle of pseudocyclical time, the *grand style* of the era can always be found in what is governed by the secret yet obvious necessity for revolution.

## 163

The natural basis of time, the concrete experience of its passage, becomes human and social by existing *for humanity*. The limitations of human practice imposed by the various stages of labor have humanized time and also dehumanized it, in the forms of cyclical time and of the separated irreversible time of economic production. The revolutionary project of a classless society, of an all-embracing historical life, implies the withering away of the social



measurement of time in favor of a *federation of independent times* — a federation of playful individual and collective forms of irreversible time that are simultaneously present. This would be the temporal realization of authentic communism, which “abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals.”

## **164**

The world already dreams of such a time. In order to actually live it, it only needs to become fully conscious of it.

## CHAPTER 7: TERRITORIAL DOMINATION

*"Whoever becomes the ruler of a city that is accustomed to freedom and does not destroy it can expect to be destroyed by it, for it can always find a pretext for rebellion in the name of its former freedom and age-old customs, which are never forgotten despite the passage of time or any benefits it has received. No matter what the ruler does or what precautions he takes, the inhabitants will never forget that freedom or those customs — unless they are separated or dispersed . . ."*

—Machiavelli, *The Prince*

165

Capitalist production has unified space, breaking down the boundaries between one society and the next. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of *banalization*. Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market shattered all regional and legal barriers and all the Medieval corporative restrictions that maintained the *quality* of craft production, it also undermined the autonomy and quality of *places*. This homogenizing power is the heavy artillery that has battered down all the walls of China.

166

The *free space of commodities* is constantly being altered and redesigned in order to

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become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to motionless monotony.

167

While eliminating geographical distance, this society produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation.

168

Tourism — human circulation packaged for consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities — is the opportunity to go and see what has been banalized. The economic organization of travel to different places already guarantees their *equivalence*. The modernization that has eliminated the time involved in travel has simultaneously eliminated the real space through which one can travel.

169

The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for molding the very territory that constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this project. Urbanism — “city planning” — is capitalism’s method for taking over the natural and human environment. Following its logical development toward total domination, capitalism now can and must refashion the totality of space into *its own particular decor*.

170

The capitalist need that is satisfied by urbanism's conspicuous petrification of life can be described in Hegelian terms as a total predominance of a "peaceful coexistence within space" over "the restless becoming that takes place in the progression of time."

171

While all the technical forces of capitalism contribute toward implementing various forms of separation, urbanism provides the material foundation for those forces and prepares the ground for their deployment. It is the very *technology of separation*.

172

Urbanism is the modern method for solving the ongoing problem of safeguarding class power by atomizing workers who have been dangerously *brought together* by the conditions of urban production. The constant struggle that has had to be waged against anything that might lead to such coming together has found urbanism to be its most effective field of operation. The efforts of all the established powers since the French Revolution to increase the means of maintaining law and order in the streets have finally culminated in the suppression of the street itself. Evoking a "civilization . . . moving along a one-way road," Lewis Mumford, in *The City in History*, points out that "with the advent of long-distance mass communications, the isolation of the

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population has become a much more effective means of control." But the general trend toward isolation, which is the underlying essence of urbanism, must also include a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. This reintegration into the system means bringing isolated individuals together *as isolated individuals*. Factories, cultural centers, tourist resorts and housing developments are specifically designed to foster this type of pseudocommunity. The same collective isolation prevails even within the *family cell*, where the omnipresent receivers of spectacular messages fill the isolation with the ruling images — images that derive their full power precisely from that isolation.

173

In all previous periods architectural innovations were designed exclusively for the ruling classes. Now for the first time a new architecture has been specifically designed *for the poor*. The aesthetic poverty and vast proliferation of this new experience in habitation stem from its *mass* character, which character in turn stems both from its function and from the modern conditions of construction. The obvious core of these conditions is the *authoritarian decisionmaking* which abstractly converts the environment into an environment of abstraction. The same architecture appears

everywhere as soon as industrialization has begun, even in the countries that are furthest behind in this regard, as an essential foundation for implanting the new type of social existence. The contradiction between the growth of society's material powers and the continued *lack of progress* toward any conscious control of those powers is revealed as glaringly by the developments of urbanism as by the issues of thermonuclear weapons or of birth control (where the possibility of manipulating heredity is already on the horizon).

174

The self-destruction of the urban environment is already well under way. The explosion of cities into the countryside, strewn with what Mumford calls "formless masses of urban debris," is directly governed by the imperatives of consumption. The dictatorship of the automobile — the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance — has left its mark on the landscape with the dominance of freeways, which tear up the old urban centers and promote an ever-wider dispersal. Within this process various forms of partially reconstituted urban fabric fleetingly crystallize around "distribution factories" — giant shopping centers built in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by acres of parking lots. But these temples of frenetic consumption are subject to the

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same irresistible centrifugal momentum, which casts them aside as soon as they have engendered enough surrounding development to become overburdened secondary centers in their turn. But the technical organization of consumption is only the most visible aspect of the general process of decomposition that has brought the city to the point of *consuming itself*.

175

Economic history, whose entire previous development centered around the opposition between city and country, has now progressed to the point of nullifying both. As a result of the current *paralysis* of any historical development beyond the independent movement of the economy, the incipient disappearance of city and country does not represent a *transcendence* of their separation, but their simultaneous collapse. The mutual erosion of city and country, resulting from the failure of the historical movement through which existing urban reality could have been overcome, is reflected in the eclectic mixture of their decomposed fragments that blanket the most industrialized regions of the world.

176

Universal history was born in cities, and it reached maturity with the city's decisive victory over the country. For Marx, one of the greatest merits of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class was the fact that it

“subjected the country to the city,” whose “very air is liberating.” But if the history of the city is a history of freedom, it is also a history of tyranny — a history of state administrations controlling not only the countryside but the cities themselves. The city has served as the historical battleground for the struggle for freedom without yet having been able to win it. The city is the *focal point of history* because it embodies both a concentration of social power, which is what makes historical enterprises possible, and a consciousness of the past. The current destruction of the city is thus merely one more reflection of humanity’s failure, thus far, to subordinate the economy to historical consciousness; of society’s failure to unify itself by reappropriating the powers that have been alienated from it.

177

“The country represents the complete opposite: isolation and separation” (*The German Ideology*). As urbanism destroys the cities, it recreates a *pseudocountryside* devoid both of the natural relations of the traditional countryside and of the direct (and directly challenged) social relations of the historical city. The conditions of habitation and spectacular control in today’s “planned environment” have created an artificial neopeasantry. The geographical dispersal and the narrow-mindedness that have always prevented the peasantry from

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undertaking independent action and becoming a creative historical force are equally characteristic of these modern producers, for whom a world of their own making is as inaccessible as were the natural rhythms of work in agrarian societies. The peasantry was the steadfast foundation of "Oriental despotism," in that its inherent fragmentation gave rise to a natural tendency toward bureaucratic centralization. The neopeasantry generated by the increasing bureaucratization of the modern state differs from the old in that its *apathy* must now be *historically manufactured* and maintained; natural ignorance has been replaced by the organized spectacle of falsification. The landscape of the "new cities" inhabited by this technological pseudopeasantry is a glaring expression of the repression of historical time on which they have been built. Their motto could be: "Nothing has ever happened here, and nothing ever will." The forces of *historical absence* have been able to create their own landscape because historical liberation, which must take place in the cities, has not yet occurred.

178

The history that threatens this twilight world could potentially subject space to a directly experienced time. Proletarian revolution is the *critique of human geography* through which individuals and communities could create places and events commensurate with

the appropriation no longer just of their work, but of their entire history. The ever-changing playing field of this new world and the freely chosen variations in the rules of the game will regenerate a diversity of local scenes that are independent without being insular. And this diversity will revive the possibility of authentic *journeys* — journeys within an authentic life that is itself understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.

179

The most revolutionary idea concerning urbanism is not itself urbanistic, technological or aesthetic. It is the project of reconstructing the entire environment in accordance with the needs of the power of workers councils, of the *antistate dictatorship* of the proletariat, of executory dialogue. Such councils can be effective only if they transform existing conditions in their entirety; and they cannot set themselves any lesser task if they wish to be recognized and *to recognize themselves* in a world of their own making.

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## CHAPTER 8: NEGATION AND CONSUMPTION WITHIN CULTURE

*"Do you really believe that these Germans will make a political revolution in our lifetime? My friend, that is just wishful thinking. . . . Let us judge Germany on the basis of its present history — and surely you are not going to object that all its history is falsified, or that all its present public life does not reflect the actual state of the people? Read whatever newspapers you please, and you cannot fail to be convinced that we never stop (and you must concede that the censorship prevents no one from stopping) celebrating the freedom and national happiness that we enjoy."*

—Ruge to Marx, March 1844

### 180

Culture is the general sphere of knowledge and of representations of lived experiences within historical societies divided into classes. It is a generalizing power which itself exists as a *separate entity*, as division of intellectual labor and as intellectual labor of division. Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society "when human life lost its unifying power and when opposites lost their living connections and interactions and became autonomous" (*The Difference Between the Systems of Fichte and Schelling*). In thus gaining its independence, culture embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that

ultimately led to the decline of that independence. The history that gave rise to the relative autonomy of culture, and to the ideological illusions regarding that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And this whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as a progressive revelation of the inadequacy of culture, as a march toward culture's self-abolition. Culture is the terrain of the quest for lost unity. In the course of this quest, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

### **181**

In the struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the basic theme of internal cultural development in historical societies, innovation always wins. But cultural innovation is generated by nothing other than the total historical movement — a movement which, in becoming conscious of itself as a whole, tends to go beyond its own cultural presuppositions and thus to move toward the suppression of all separations.

### **182**

The rapid expansion of society's knowledge, including the understanding that history is the underlying basis of culture, led to the irreversible self-knowledge reflected by the destruction of God. But this "first condition of any critique" is also the first task of a critique without end. When there are no longer any tenable rules of conduct, each

*result* of culture pushes culture toward its own dissolution. Like philosophy the moment it achieved full independence, every discipline that becomes autonomous is bound to collapse — first as a credible pretension to give a coherent account of the social totality, and ultimately even as a fragmented methodology that might be workable within its own domain. Separate culture's *lack of rationality* is what dooms it to disappear, because that culture already embodies a striving for the victory of the rational.

### **183**

Culture grew out of a history that dissolved the previous way of life, but as a separate sphere within a *partially historical* society its understanding and sensory communication inevitably remain partial. It is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.

### **184**

The end of the history of culture manifests itself in two opposing forms: the project of culture's self-transcendence within total history, and its preservation as a dead object for spectacular contemplation. The first tendency has linked its fate to social critique, the second to the defense of class power.

### **185**

Each of these two forms of the end of culture has a unitary existence, both within

all the aspects of knowledge and within all the aspects of sensory representation (that is, within what was formerly understood as *art* in the broadest sense of the word). In the case of knowledge, the accumulation of branches of fragmentary knowledge, which become unusable because *approval* of existing conditions ultimately requires *renouncing one's own knowledge*, is opposed by the theory of praxis which alone has access to the truth of all these forms of knowledge since it alone knows the secret of their use. In the case of sensory representations, the critical self-destruction of society's former *common language* is opposed by its artificial reconstruction within the commodity spectacle, the illusory representation of nonlife.

## 186

Once society has lost its myth-based community, it loses all the reference points of truly common language until such time as the divisions within the inactive community can be overcome by the inauguration of a real historical community. When art, which was the common language of social inaction, develops into independent art in the modern sense, emerging from its original religious universe and becoming individual production of separate works, it too becomes subject to the movement governing the history of all separate culture. Its declaration of independence is the beginning of its end.

### 187

The *positive* significance of the modern decomposition and destruction of all art is that the language of communication has been lost. The *negative* implication of this development is that a common language can no longer take the form of the unilateral conclusions that characterized the art of historical societies — *belated* portrayals of *someone else's* dialogueless life which accepted this lack as inevitable — but must now be found in a praxis that unifies direct activity with its own appropriate language. The point is to actually take part in the community of dialogue and the game with time that up till now have merely been *represented* by poetic and artistic works.

### 188

When art becomes independent and paints its world in dazzling colors, a moment of life has grown old. Such a moment cannot be rejuvenated by dazzling colors, it can only be evoked in memory. The greatness of art only emerges at the dusk of life.

### 189

The historical time that invaded art was manifested first of all in the sphere of art itself, beginning with the *baroque*. Baroque was the art of a world that had lost its center with the collapse of the last mythical order: the Medieval synthesis of a unified Christianity with the ghost of an Empire,

which had harmonized heavenly and earthly government. The *art of change* inevitably embodied the same ephemerality that it discovered in the world. As Eugenio d'Ors put it, it chose "life instead of eternity." The outstanding achievements of baroque were in theater and festival, or in theatrical festivals, where the sole purpose of each particular artistic expression was to contribute to the composition of a scene, a scene which had to serve as its own center of unification; and that center was the *passage*, the expression of a threatened equilibrium within the overall dynamic disorder. The somewhat excessive emphasis on the concept of baroque in contemporary aesthetic discussions reflects the awareness that artistic classicism is no longer possible. The attempts to establish a normative classicism or neoclassicism during the last three centuries have been nothing but short-lived artificial constructs speaking the official language of the state (whether of the absolute monarchy or of the revolutionary bourgeoisie draped in Roman togas). What eventually followed baroque, once it had run its course, was an ever more individualistic art of negation which, from romanticism to cubism, continually renewed its assaults until it had fragmented and destroyed the entire artistic sphere. The disappearance of historical art, which was linked to the internal communication of an elite and which had its semi-independent social basis in the partially playful conditions still



experienced by the last aristocracies, also reflects the fact that capitalism is the first form of class power that acknowledges its own total lack of ontological quality — a power whose basis in the mere management of the economy is symptomatic of the loss of all human *mastery*. The comprehensive unity of the baroque ensemble, which has long been lacking in the world of artistic *creation*, has in a sense been revived in today's wholesale *consumption* of the totality of past art. As all the art of the past comes to be recognized and appreciated historically, and is retrospectively reclassified as phases of a single "world art," it is incorporated into a global disorder that can itself be seen as a sort of baroque structure at a higher level, a structure that absorbs baroque art itself along with all its possible revivals. For the first time in history the arts of all ages and civilizations can be known and accepted together, and the fact that it has become possible to collect and recollect all these art-historical memories marks the *end of the world of art*. In this age of museums in which artistic communication is no longer possible, all the previous expressions of art can be accepted equally, because whatever particular communication problems they may have had are eclipsed by all the present-day obstacles to communication *in general*.

Art in its period of dissolution — a movement of negation striving for its own transcendence within a historical society where history is not yet directly lived — is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its pretensions, the further from its grasp is its true fulfillment. This art is necessarily *avant-garde*, and at the same time it *does not really exist*. Its avant-garde is its own disappearance.

## 191

Dadaism and surrealism were the two currents that marked the end of modern art. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they were contemporaries of the last great offensive of the revolutionary proletarian movement; and the defeat of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere whose decrepitude they had denounced, was the fundamental reason for their immobilization. Dadaism and surrealism were historically linked yet also opposed to each other. This opposition involved the most important and radical contributions of the two movements, but it also revealed the internal inadequacy of their one-sided critiques. Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realizing it*; surrealism sought to *realize art without abolishing it*. The critical position since developed by the *situationists* has shown that the abolition and realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single *transcendence of art*.

The spectacular consumption that preserves past culture in congealed form, including coopted rehashes of its negative manifestations, gives overt expression in its cultural sector to what it implicitly is in its totality: the *communication of noncommunication*. The most extreme destruction of language can be officially welcomed as a positive development because it amounts to yet one more way of flaunting one's acceptance of a status quo where all communication has been smugly declared absent. The critical truth of this destruction — the real life of modern poetry and art — is obviously concealed, since the spectacle, whose function is to *use culture to bury all historical memory*, applies its own essential strategy in its promotion of modernistic pseudoinnovations. Thus a school of neoliterature that baldly admits that it does nothing but contemplate the written word for its own sake can pass itself off as something new. Meanwhile, alongside the simple claim that the death of communication has a sufficient beauty of its own, the most modern tendency of spectacular culture — which is also the one most closely linked to the repressive practice of the general organization of society — seeks by means of "collective projects" to construct complex neoartistic environments out of decomposed elements, as can be seen in urbanism's attempts to

incorporate scraps of art or hybrid aesthetico-technical forms. This is an expression, in the domain of spectacular pseudoculture, of advanced capitalism's general project of remolding the fragmented worker into a "socially integrated personality," a tendency that has been described by recent American sociologists (Riesman, Whyte, etc.). In all these areas the goal remains the same: to *restructure society without community*.

### 193

As culture becomes completely commodified it tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society. Clark Kerr, one of the foremost ideologues of this tendency, has calculated that the complex process of production, distribution and consumption of *knowledge* already accounts for 29% of the gross national product of the United States; and he predicts that in the second half of this century the "knowledge industry" will become the driving force of the American economy, as was the automobile in the first half of this century and the railroad in the last half of the previous century.

### 194

The task of the various branches of knowledge that are in the process of developing *spectacular thought* is to justify an unjustifiable society and to establish a general science of false consciousness. This thought is totally conditioned by the fact

that it cannot recognize, and does not want to recognize, its own material dependence on the spectacular system.

## 195

The official thought of the social organization of appearances is itself obscured by the generalized *lack of communication* that it has to defend. It cannot understand that conflict is at the origin of everything in its world. The specialists of spectacular power — a power that is absolute within its realm of one-way communication — are absolutely corrupted by their experience of contempt and by the success of that contempt, because they find their contempt confirmed by their awareness of how *truly contemptible* spectators really are.

## 196

As the very triumphs of the spectacular system pose new problems, a new division of tasks appears within the specialized thought of that system. On one hand, a *spectacular critique of the spectacle* is undertaken by modern sociology, which studies separation exclusively by means of the conceptual and material instruments of separation. On the other, the various disciplines where structuralism has become entrenched are developing an *apologetics of the spectacle* — a mindless thought that imposes an *official amnesia* regarding all historical practice. But the fake despair of nondialectical

critique and the fake optimism of overt promotion of the system are equally submissive.

## 197

The sociologists who have begun to raise questions about the living conditions created by modern social developments (first of all in the United States) have gathered a great deal of empirical data, but they have failed to grasp the true nature of their object of study because they fail to recognize the critique that is inherent in that object. As a result, those among them who sincerely wish to reform these conditions can only appeal to ethical standards, common sense, moderation, and other measures that are equally inadequate for dealing with the problems in question. Because this method of criticism is unaware of the negativity at the heart of its world, it focuses on describing and deploring an excessive sort of negativity that seems to blight the surface of that world like some irrational parasitic infestation. This outraged good will, which even within its own moralizing framework ends up blaming only the external consequences of the system, can see itself as critical only by ignoring the essentially *apologetic* character of its assumptions and methods.

## 198

Those who denounce the affluent society's incitement to wastefulness as absurd or

dangerous do not understand the purpose of this wastefulness. In the name of economic rationality, they ungratefully condemn the faithful irrational guardians that keep the power of this economic rationality from collapsing. Daniel Boorstin, for example, whose book *The Image* describes spectacle-commodity consumption in the United States, never arrives at the concept of the spectacle because he thinks he can treat private life and "honest commodities" as separate from the "excesses" he deplores. He fails to understand that the commodity itself made the laws whose "honest" application leads both to the distinct reality of private life and to its subsequent reconquest by the social consumption of images.

## 199

Boorstin describes the excesses of a world that has become foreign to us as if they were excesses foreign to our world. When, like a moral or psychological prophet, he denounces the superficial reign of images as a product of "our extravagant expectations," he is implicitly contrasting these excesses to a "normal" life that has no reality in either his book or his era. Because the real human life that Boorstin evokes is located for him in the past, including the past that was dominated by religious resignation, he has no way of comprehending the true extent of the present society's domination by images.

We can truly understand this society only by *negating* it.

## 200

A sociology that believes that a separately functioning industrial rationality can be isolated from social life as a whole may go on to view the techniques of reproduction and communication as independent of general industrial development. Thus Boorstin concludes that the situation he describes is caused by an unfortunate but almost fortuitous encounter of an excessive technology of image-diffusion with an excessive appetite for sensationalism on the part of today's public. This amounts to blaming the spectacle on modern man's excessive inclination to be a spectator. Boorstin fails to see that the proliferation of the prefabricated "pseudo-events" he denounces flows from the simple fact that the overwhelming realities of present-day social existence prevent people from actually living events for themselves. Because history itself haunts modern society like a specter, pseudohistories have to be concocted at every level in order to preserve the threatened equilibrium of the present *frozen time*.

## 201

The current tendency toward *structuralist* systematization is based on the explicit or implicit assumption that this brief freezing of historical time will last forever. The



antihistorical thought of structuralism believes in the eternal presence of a system that was never created and that will never come to an end. Its illusion that all social practice is unconsciously determined by preexisting structures is based on illegitimate analogies with structural models developed by linguistics and anthropology (or even on models used for analyzing the functioning of capitalism) — models that were *already inaccurate even in their original contexts*. This fallacious reasoning stems from the limited intellectual and imaginative capacity of the *academic functionaries* hired to expound this thought, who are so thoroughly caught up in their awestruck celebration of the existing system that they can do nothing but reduce all reality to the existence of that system.

## 202

In order to understand “structuralist” categories, one must bear in mind that such categories, like those of any other historical social science, reflect forms and conditions of existence. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, one cannot judge or admire this particular society by assuming that the language it speaks to itself is necessarily true. “We cannot judge such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, that consciousness must be explained in the light of the contradictions of material life...” Structures are the progeny

of established powers. Structuralism is *thought underwritten by the state*, a form of thought that regards the present conditions of spectacular “communication” as an absolute. Its method of studying code in isolation from content is merely a reflection of a taken-for-granted society where communication takes the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals. Structuralism does not prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the spectacle; on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its overwhelming reality, that validates the frigid dream of structuralism.

## 203

The critical concept of “the spectacle” can undoubtedly be turned into one more hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric used to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract*, thus serving to reinforce the spectacular system. It is obvious that ideas alone cannot lead beyond the existing spectacle; at most, they can only lead beyond existing ideas about the spectacle. To actually destroy the society of the spectacle, people must set a practical force into motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it unites with the practical current of negation in society. And that negation, the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, can for its part only become conscious of itself by developing the critique of the spectacle, which is the theory of its real conditions —

the concrete conditions of present-day oppression — and which also reveals its hidden potential. This theory does not expect miracles from the working class. It envisages the reformulation and fulfillment of proletarian demands as a long-term task. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle (for the formulation and communication of the type of theory envisaged here is already inconceivable without a *rigorous practice*), it is certain that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the fate of the practical movement acting on the scale of society.

## 204

Critical theory must *communicate itself* in its own language — the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in both form and content. It must be an all-inclusive critique, and it must be grounded in history. It is not a “zero degree of writing,” but its opposite. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

## 205

The very style of dialectical theory is a scandal and abomination to the prevailing standards of language and to the sensibilities molded by those standards, because while it makes concrete use of existing concepts it simultaneously recognizes their *fluidity* and their inevitable destruction.

This style, which contains its own critique, must express the domination of the present critique *over its entire past*. Dialectical theory's mode of exposition reveals the negative spirit within it. "Truth is not like some finished product in which one can no longer find any trace of the tool that made it" (Hegel). This theoretical consciousness of a movement whose traces must remain visible within it is manifested by the *reversal* of established relationships between concepts and by the *détournement* of all the achievements of earlier critical efforts. Hegel's practice of reversing the genitive was an expression of historical revolutions, though that expression was confined to the form of thought. The young Marx, inspired by Feuerbach's systematic reversal of subject and predicate, achieved the most effective use of this *insurrectional style*, which answers "the philosophy of poverty" with "the poverty of philosophy." Détournement reradicalizes previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies. Kierkegaard already used it deliberately, though he also denounced it: "But despite all your twists and turns, just as jam always returns to the pantry, you always end up introducing some little phrase which is not your own, and which awakens disturbing recollections" (*Philosophical Fragments*). As he acknowledged elsewhere

in the same book, this use of *détournement* requires maintaining one's *distance* from whatever has been turned into an official truth: "One further remark regarding your many complaints that I introduced borrowed expressions into my exposition. I do not deny that I did so. It was in fact done deliberately. In the next section of this work, if I ever write such a section, I intend to call this topic by its true name and to clothe the problem in its historical attire."

## 207

Ideas improve. The meaning of words plays a role in that improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress depends on it. It sticks close to an author's phrasing, exploits his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one.

## 208

*Détournement* is the opposite of quotation, of appealing to a theoretical authority that is inevitably tainted by the very fact that it has become a quotation — a fragment torn from its own context and development, and ultimately from the general framework of its period and from the particular option (appropriate or erroneous) that it represented within that framework. *Détournement* is the flexible language of anti-ideology. It appears in communication that knows it cannot claim to embody any definitive certainty. It is language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any

previous or supracritical reference. On the contrary, its own internal coherence and practical effectiveness are what validate the previous kernels of truth it has brought back into play. *Détournement* has grounded its cause on nothing but its own truth as present critique.

## 209

The element of *overt* *détournement* in formulated theory refutes any notion that such theory is durably autonomous. By introducing into the theoretical domain the same type of *violent subversion* that disrupts and overthrows every existing order, *détournement* serves as a reminder that theory is nothing in itself, that it can realize itself only through historical action and through the *historical correction* that is its true allegiance.

## 210

The real values of culture can be maintained only by negating culture. But this negation can no longer be a *cultural* negation. In a sense it may take place within culture, but it points beyond it.

## 211

In the language of contradiction, the critique of culture is a *unified* critique, in that it dominates the whole of culture — its knowledge as well as its poetry — and in that it no longer separates itself from the critique of the social totality. This *unified*

*theoretical critique* is on its way to meet  
*unified*                      *social*                      *practice*.

## CHAPTER 9: IDEOLOGY MATERIALIZED

*"Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself only insofar as it exists in and for another self-consciousness; that is, it exists only by being recognized and acknowledged."*

—Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*

### 212

Ideology is the intellectual *basis* of class societies within the conflictual course of history. Ideological expressions have never been pure fictions; they represent a distorted consciousness of realities, and as such they have been real factors that have in turn produced real distorting effects. This interconnection is intensified with the advent of the spectacle — the *materialization* of ideology brought about by the concrete success of an autonomized system of economic production — which virtually identifies social reality with an ideology that has remolded all reality in its own image.

### 213

Once ideology — the *abstract* will to universality and the illusion associated with that will — is legitimized by the universal abstraction and the effective dictatorship of illusion that prevail in modern society, it is no longer a voluntaristic struggle of the fragmentary, but its triumph. Ideological pretensions take on a sort of flat, positivistic



precision: they no longer represent historical choices, they are assertions of undeniable facts. The particular *names* of ideologies thus tend to disappear. The specifically ideological forms of system-supporting labor are reduced to an “epistemological base” that is itself presumed to be beyond ideology. Materialized ideology has no name, just as it has no formulatable historical agenda. Which is another way of saying that the history of *different ideologies* is over.

## 214

Ideology, whose whole internal logic led toward what Mannheim calls “total ideology” — the despotism of a fragment imposing itself as pseudoknowledge of a frozen *totality*, as a *totalitarian* worldview — has reached its culmination in the immobilized spectacle of nonhistory. Its culmination is also its dissolution into society as a whole. When that society itself is *concretely dissolved*, ideology — the *final irrationality* standing in the way of historical life — must also disappear.

## 215

The spectacle is the acme of ideology because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. The spectacle is the material “expression of the separation and estrangement between man and man.” The

“new power of deception” concentrated in it is based on the production system in which “as the mass of objects increases, so do the alien powers to which man is subjected.” This is the supreme stage of an expansion that has turned need against life. “The need for money is thus the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates” (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*). Hegel’s characterization of money as “the self-moving life of what is dead” (*Jenenser Realphilosophie*) has now been extended by the spectacle to all social life.

## 216

In contrast to the project outlined in the “Theses on Feuerbach” (the realization of philosophy in a praxis transcending the opposition between idealism and materialism), the spectacle preserves the ideological features of both materialism and idealism, imposing them in the pseudoconcreteness of its universe. The contemplative aspect of the old materialism, which conceives the world as representation and not as activity — and which ultimately idealizes matter — is fulfilled in the spectacle, where concrete things are automatic masters of social life. Conversely, the *dreamed activity* of idealism is also fulfilled in the spectacle, through the technical mediation of signs and signals — which ultimately materialize an abstract ideal.

## 217

The parallel between ideology and schizophrenia demonstrated in Gabel's *False Consciousness* should be considered in the context of this economic materialization of ideology. Society has become what ideology already was. The repression of practice and the antidialectical false consciousness that results from that repression are imposed at every moment of everyday life subjected to the spectacle — a subjection that systematically destroys the “faculty of encounter” and replaces it with a *social hallucination*: a false consciousness of encounter, an “illusion of encounter.” In a society where no one can any longer be *recognized* by others, each individual becomes incapable of recognizing his own reality. Ideology is at home; separation has built its own world.

## 218

“In clinical descriptions of schizophrenia,” says Gabel, “the disintegration of the dialectic of totality (with dissociation as its extreme form) and the disintegration of the dialectic of becoming (with catatonia as its extreme form) seem closely interrelated.” Imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the *screen* of the spectacle that has enthralled him, the spectator knows no one but the *fictitious speakers* who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their

commodities. The spectacle as a whole serves as his looking glass. What he sees there are dramatizations of illusory escapes from a universal autism.

## 219

The spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world. It also obliterates the boundaries between true and false by repressing all directly lived truth beneath the *real presence* of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. Individuals who passively accept their subjection to an alien everyday reality are thus driven toward a madness that reacts to this fate by resorting to illusory magical techniques. The essence of this pseudoresponse to an unanswerable communication is the acceptance and consumption of commodities. The consumer's compulsion to imitate is a truly infantile need, conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession. As Gabel puts it in describing a quite different level of pathology, "the abnormal need for representation compensates for an agonizing feeling of being at the margin of existence."

## 220

In contrast to the logic of false consciousness, which cannot truly know itself, the search for critical truth about the spectacle must also be a true critique. It

must struggle in practice among the irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle, and admit that it is nothing without them. By rushing into sordid reformist compromises or pseudorevolutionary collective actions, those driven by an abstract desire for immediate effectiveness are in reality obeying the ruling laws of thought, adopting a perspective that can see nothing but the *latest news*. In this way delirium reappears in the camp that claims to be opposing it. A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must *know how to wait*.

## 221

The self-emancipation of our time is an emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth. This “historic mission of establishing truth in the world” can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that is able to dissolve all classes by reducing all power to the de-alienating form of realized democracy — to councils in which practical theory verifies itself and surveys its own actions. This is possible only when individuals are “directly linked to universal history” and dialogue arms itself to impose its own conditions.

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# THE QUESTION OF ORGANIZATION FOR THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL

**GUY DEBORD, APRIL 1968**

TRANSLATED BY POINT BLANK, 1972

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ISSN 1084-7340.

Snail mail: POB 1115, Stuyvesant Station,  
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1. Up until now, everything for which the SI has been known belongs to an age that is fortunately over (more precisely, it can be said that this was the "second period," if the activity that centered around the supersession of art from 1957 to 1962 is counted as the first).

2. The new revolutionary tendencies of current society, however weak and confused they may still be, are no longer restricted to a clandestine scope: this year they are appearing in the street.

3. Parallel to this, the SI emerged from silence, and in strategic terms it must now exploit this opening. The vogue that the term "situationist" has achieved here and there cannot be prevented. We must act in such a way that this (normal) phenomenon serves us more than it hinders us. To me, "what serves us" is indistinguishable from what serves to unify and radicalize scattered struggles. This is the SI's task as an organization. Beyond this, the term "situationist" could be used to vaguely designate a certain age of critical thought (and it is no mean feat to have inaugurated this), but where everybody is only engaged by what he does personally, without any reference to an organizational community. But as long as such a community exists, it will have to succeed in distinguishing itself from whoever talks about it without being a part of it.

4. Concerning the tasks on which we already recognized each other previously, it can be said that we must presently concentrate less on theoretical elaboration, which is to be continued, and more on its communication. Essentially, we must emphasize our practical relationship with what appears, while immediately increasing our possibilities for intervention, for critiques, and for exemplary support.

5. The movement that is beginning primitively is the beginning of our victory (in other words, the victory that we have been supporting and pointing out for many years). But we must not "capitalize" on this victory, for every affirmation of a moment of the revolutionary critique calls for the requirement that every coherent organization must know how to lose itself in revolutionary society. In the current and forthcoming subversive currents, there is much to criticize. It would be very clumsy if we were to make this necessary critique while leaving the SI above it all.

6. The SI must now prove its efficiency in a subsequent stage of revolutionary activity -- or else disappear.

7. In order to have the opportunities of attaining this efficiency, we must recognize and state several truths about the SI that were certainly true prior to this; but, in the current stage, at which "the truth is verifying itself," it has become urgent to make it precise.

8. Since we have never considered the SI to be a goal in itself, but as a moment of historical activity, the force of things now leads us to prove it. The "coherence" of the SI is the relationship, directed towards coherence, between all the theses that have been formulated, between them and our action, as well as our solidarity on many, but not all, of the questions about which each of us must engage the responsibility of others. It cannot be a kind of mastery that is guaranteed to anybody, because this person would then gain the reputation of having acquired our theoretical bases so well that he [sic] would automatically glean an exemplary line of conduct from them. It cannot be a demand for an equal excellence of all on all questions or operations, and even less can it be a recognition of such excellence.

9. Coherence is acquired and verified by egalitarian participation in the totality of a

common practice, which simultaneously reveals mistakes and supplies remedies -- this practice requires formal meetings to arrive at decisions, the transmission of all information, and the examination of all stated failures.

10. Currently, this practice demands more participants in the SI, taken from among those who affirm their accord and display their capacities. The small number of members has been selected very unjustly up until now, and it has been the cause and the consequence of a ridiculous over-estimation "officially" accorded to all the members of the SI simply by virtue of that fact, when many of them had in no way given proof of any minimum real capacities (i.e., the exclusions that have occurred in one year, Garnautins or [Englishmen](#)). Such a pseudo-qualitative numerical limitation exaggeratedly increases the importance of each particular stupidity while supporting it at the same time.

11. Externally, a direct product of this selective illusion has been the mythological recognition of autonomous pseudo-groups, gloriously located at the level of the SI when they were merely feeble-minded admirers (and, briefly put, were necessarily dishonest

slanderers as well). It seems to me that we cannot recognize any group as autonomous unless they are engaged in autonomous practical work, nor the lasting success of such a group unless they are engaged in united action with the workers (without of course having such action fall below our "minimum definition of revolutionary organizations"). All kinds of recent experiences have shown the recuperated confusionism of the term "anarchist," and it seems to me that we must oppose this confusionism everywhere.

12. I submit that the possibility of tendencies concerning diverse preoccupations or tactical options must be admitted into the SI on the condition that our general bases not be put into question. Furthermore, we must advance toward a complete practical autonomy of [national groups](#), to the extent that they will be really able to constitute themselves.

13. Contrary to the habits of the excluded people who inactively pretended in 1966 to attain a total realization of transparency and friendship in the SI (it was almost embarrassing to judge their company to be boring), and who, as a corollary, developed the most idiotic jealousies, lies unworthy of

grammar school kids, and conspiracies as ignominious as they were irrational, and all of this in secret -- contrary to their habits, we must only admit historical relationships among us, (i.e., a critical confidence, the knowledge of each member's possibilities or limits), but only on the basis of the fundamental loyalty demanded by the revolutionary project that has been defining itself for over a century.

14. We have no right to be mistaken in breaking with people. We will have to be mistaken in matters of adhesion, and more or less frequently, at that. Exclusions have almost never marked any theoretical progress of the SI (on such occasions, we have not arrived at a more precise definition of what is unacceptable; indeed, the surprising thing about the Garnautins is precisely linked to the fact that it was an exception to this rule). Exclusions have almost always been responses to objective pressures that existing conditions reserved for our action. Thus, we run the risk of having this reproduce itself on higher levels. All kinds of "Nashisms" could re-shape themselves: the only question is whether we are in a position to destroy them.

15. To accord the form of this debate to what I believe to be its content, I propose that this text be communicated to certain comrades close to the SI or desirous of taking part in it, and that we solicit their opinion on this question.

NOTE ADDED BY DEBORD IN AUGUST 1969

These notes of April 1968 were a contribution to a debate on organization that at the time had to begin. Two or three weeks afterwards, the occupations movement, which was certainly more agreeable and more instructive than this debate, forced us to set them aside.

The last point alone had been immediately approved by the comrades of the SI. Thus, this text, which obviously has nothing secret about it, was, properly speaking, not even an internal SI document. However, toward the end of 1968, we found that truncated and undated version of it had been circulated by several leftist groups, to what purposes is unknown. Consequently, the SI decided that the authentic version had to be published in this review [*Internationale Situationniste*].



When our discussion on organization was able to be renewed in the fall of 1968, the facts progressed very swiftly, and the situationists adopted these theses, which were confirmed. Reciprocally, the SI knew how to act in May in a manner that suitably responded to the demands that these theses had formulated for the immediate future.

At the moment when this text is receiving wider distribution, I think it necessary to add precision, in order to avoid any misunderstanding on the question of the relative openness demanded by the SI. I have not proposed any concession here to "common action" with those semi-radical currents that are already in a position to be formed, and especially not the abandonment of our rigor in choosing the members of the SI and in the limitation of their number. I criticized a bad, abstract use of this rigor, which could lead to the contrary of what we want. The admiring or subsequently hostile excesses of all those who speak of us from the viewpoint of unwanted and passionate spectators cannot be answered by a "situ braggadocio" that would help spread the word that the situationists are marvelous people effectively possessing everything in their lives that they have expressed, or simply admitted, as a revolutionary theory

and program. Since May, it has been seen what magnitude and urgency this problem has assumed.

The situationists do not have a monopoly to defend, nor any reward to anticipate. A task that suited us has been undertaken and maintained through good and bad, and as a whole, correctly with what is to be found here. The current development of the subjective conditions of the revolution must lead toward the definition of a strategy that, starting from different data, should be as good as that which the SI has followed in more difficult times.

# COMMENTS ON THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

**GUY DEBORD, 1988**

TRANSLATED BY MALCOLM IMRIE

However desperate the situation  
and circumstances, do not  
despair. When there is  
everything to fear, be unafraid.  
When surrounded by dangers,  
fear none of them. When without  
resources, depend on  
resourcefulness. When  
surprised, take the enemy itself  
by surprise." Sun Tzu, *The Art of  
War*. [1]

In memory of Gerard Lebovici,  
ambushed and murdered in Paris  
on 5 March 1984 by persons still  
unknown

## **I**

These comments are sure to be welcomed by  
fifty or sixty people; a large number given  
the times in which we live and the gravity of  
the matters under discussion. But then, of

course, in some circles I am considered to be an authority. It must also be borne in mind that a good half of this interested elite will consist of people who devote themselves to maintaining the spectacular system of domination, and the other half of people who persist in doing quite the opposite. Having, then, to take account of readers who are both attentive and diversely influential, I obviously cannot speak with complete freedom. Above all, I must take care not to give too much information to just anybody.

Our unfortunate times thus compel me, once again, to write in a new way. Some elements will be intentionally omitted; and the plan will have to remain rather unclear. Readers will encounter certain decoys, like the very hallmark of the era. As long as certain pages are interpolated here and there, the overall meaning may appear just as secret clauses have very often been added to whatever treaties may openly stipulate; just as some chemical agents only reveal their hidden properties when they are combined with others. However, in this brief work there will be only too many things which are, alas, easy to understand.

## II.

In 1967, in a book entitled *The Society of the Spectacle*, I showed what the modern spectacle was already in essence: the

autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign. The disturbances of 1968, which in several countries lasted into the following years, having nowhere overthrown the existing organization of the society from which it springs apparently spontaneously, the spectacle has thus continued to gather strength, that is, to spread to the furthest limits on all sides, while increasing its density in the center. It has even learnt new defensive techniques, as powers under attack always do. When I began the critique of spectacular society, what was particularly noticed -- given the period -- was the revolutionary content that could be discovered in that critique; and it was naturally felt to be its most troublesome element. As to the spectacle itself, I was sometimes accused of having invented it out of thin air, and was always accused of indulging myself to excess in my evaluation of its depth and unity, and its real workings. I must admit that others who later published new books on the same subject demonstrated that it was quite possible to say less. All they had to do was to replace the totality and its movement by a single static detail on the surface of the phenomenon, with each author demonstrating his originality by choosing a different and all the less disturbing one. No one wanted to taint the scientific modesty of

his personal interpretation by interposing reckless historical judgments.

Nonetheless, the society of the spectacle has continued to advance. It moves quickly for in 1967 it had barely forty years behind it, though it had used them to the full. And by its own development, which no one took the trouble to investigate, it has since shown with some astonishing achievements that it was effectively just what I said it was. Proving this point has more than academic value, because it is undoubtedly indispensable to have understood the spectacle's unity and articulation as an active force in order to examine the directions in which this force has since been able to travel. These questions are of great interest, for it is under such conditions that the next stage of social conflict will necessarily be played out. Since the spectacle today is certainly more powerful than it was before, what is it doing with this additional power? What point has it reached, that it had not reached previously? What, in short, are its present lines of advance? The vague feeling that there has been a rapid invasion which has forced people to lead their lives in an entirely different way is now widespread; but this is experienced rather like some inexplicable change in the climate, or in some other natural equilibrium, a change faced with which ignorance knows only that it has nothing to say. What is more, many see it as a civilizing invasion, as

something inevitable, and even want to collaborate. Such people would rather not know the precise purpose of this conquest, and how it is advancing.

I am going to outline certain practical consequences, still little known, of the spectacle's rapid extension over the last twenty years. I have no intention of entering into polemics on any aspect of this question; these are now too easy, and too useless. Nor will I try to convince. The present comments are not concerned with moralizing. They do not propose what is desirable, or merely preferable. They simply record what is.

### III.

No one today can reasonably doubt the existence or the power of the spectacle; on the contrary, one might doubt whether it is reasonable to add anything on a question which experience has already settled in such draconian fashion. *Le Monde* of 19 September 1987 offered a felicitous illustration of the saying, "If it exists, there's no need to talk about it," a fundamental law in these spectacular times which, at least in this respect, ensure there is no such thing as a backward country.

That modern society is a society of the spectacle now goes without saying. Indeed people

will soon only be conspicuous by their reticence. One loses count of all the books describing a phenomenon which now marks all the industrialized nations yet equally spares none of the countries which has still to catch up. What is so droll, however, is that all the books which do analyze this phenomenon, usually to deplore it, cannot but join the spectacle if they're to get attention.

It is true that this spectacular critique of the spectacle, which is not only late but, even worse, seeks 'attention' on the same level, inevitably sticks to vain generalities or hypocritical regrets; just as futile as the clowns who parade their well-mannered disillusion in newspapers.

The empty debate on the spectacle -- that is, on the activities of the world's owners -- is thus organized by the spectacle itself: everything is said about the extensive means at its disposal, to ensure that nothing is said about their extensive deployment. Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term 'media.' And by this they mean to describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service which with impartial 'professionalism' would facilitate the new wealth of mass communication through mass media a form of communication which has at



last attained a unilateral purity, whereby decisions already taken are presented for passive admiration. For what is communicated are orders; and with perfect harmony, those who give them are also those who tell us what they think of them.

Spectacular power, which is so fundamentally unitary, so concentrated by the very weight of things, and entirely despotic in spirit, frequently rails at the appearance in its realm of a spectacular politics, a spectacular justice, a spectacular medicine and all the other similarly surprising examples of 'media excess.' Thus the spectacle would be merely the excesses of the media, whose nature, unquestionably good since it facilitates communication, is sometimes driven to extremes.

Often enough society's bosses declare themselves ill-served by their media employees: more often they blame the spectators for the common, almost bestial manner in which they indulge in the media's delights. A virtually infinite number of supposed differences within the media thus serve to screen what is in fact the result of a spectacular convergence, pursued with remarkable tenacity. Just as the logic of the commodity reigns over capitalists' competing ambitions, and the logic of war always dominates the frequent modifications in weaponry, so the harsh logic of the

spectacle controls the abundant diversity of media extravagances.

In all that has happened in the last twenty years, the most important change lies in the very continuity of the spectacle. This has nothing to do with the perfecting of its media instruments, which had already reached a highly advanced stage of development; it means quite simply that the spectacle's domination has succeeded in raising a whole generation molded to its laws. The extraordinary new conditions in which this entire generation has effectively lived constitute a precise and comprehensive summary of all that, henceforth, the spectacle will forbid; and also all that it will permit.

#### IV.

On a theoretical level I only need add a single detail to my earlier formulations, albeit one which has farreaching consequences. In 1967 I distinguished two rival and successive forms of spectacular power, the concentrated and the diffuse. Both of them floated above real society, as its goal and its lie. The former, favoring the ideology condensed around a dictatorial personality, had accomplished the totalitarian counter-revolution, fascist as well as Stalinist. The latter, driving wage-earners to apply their freedom of choice to

the vast range of new commodities now on offer, had represented the Americanization of the world, a process which in some respects frightened but also successfully seduced those countries where it had been possible to maintain traditional forms of bourgeois democracy. Since then a third form has been established, through the rational combination of these two, and on the basis of a general victory of the form which had showed itself stronger: the diffuse. This is the integrated spectacle, which has since tended to impose itself globally.

Whereas Russia and Germany were largely responsible for the formation of the concentrated spectacle, and the United States for the diffuse form, the integrated spectacle has been pioneered by France and Italy. The emergence of this new form is attributable to a number of shared historical features, namely, the important role of the Stalinist party and unions in political and intellectual life, a weak democratic tradition, the long monopoly of power enjoyed by a single party of government, and the need to eliminate an unexpected upsurge in revolutionary activity.

The integrated spectacle shows itself to be simultaneously concentrated and diffuse, and ever since the fruitful union of the two has learnt to employ both these qualities on a grander scale. Their former mode of

application has changed considerably. As regards concentration, the controlling center has now become occult never to be occupied by a known leader, or clear ideology. And on the diffuse side, the spectacle has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the full range of socially produced behavior and objects. For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this -- that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien. When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality. It was easy to predict in theory what has been quickly and universally demonstrated by practical experience of economic reason's relentless accomplishments: that the globalisation of the false was also the falsification of the globe. Beyond a legacy of old books and old buildings, still of some significance but destined to continual reduction and, moreover, increasingly highlighted and classified to suit the spectacle's requirements, there remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry. Even genetics has become

readily accessible to the dominant social forces.

Spectacular government, which now possesses all the means necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception, is the absolute master of memories just as it is the unfettered master of plans which will shape the most distant future. It reigns unchecked; it executes its summary judgments.

It is in these conditions that a parodic end of the division of labor suddenly appears, with carnivalesque gaiety, all the more welcome because it coincides with the generalized disappearance of all real ability. A financier can be a singer, a lawyer a police spy, a baker can parade his literary tastes, an actor can be president, a chef can philosophize on cookery techniques as if they were landmarks in universal history. Anyone can join the spectacle, in order publicly to adopt, or sometimes secretly practice, an entirely different activity from whatever specialism first made their name. Where 'media status' has acquired infinitely more importance than the value of anything one might actually be capable of doing, it is normal for this status to be readily transferable; for anyone, anywhere, to have the same right to the same kind of stardom. Most often these accelerated media particles pursue their own careers in the glow of statutorily guaranteed admiration. But it sometimes

happens that the transition to the media provides the cover for several different enterprises, officially independent but in fact secretly linked by various ad hoc networks. With the result that occasionally the social division of labor, along with the readily foreseeable unity of its application, reappears in quite new forms: for example, one can now publish a novel in order to arrange an assassination. Such picturesque examples also go to show that one should never trust someone because of their job.

Yet the highest ambition of the integrated spectacle is still to turn secret agents into revolutionaries, and revolutionaries into secret agents.

## V.

The society whose modernization has reached the stage of the integrated spectacle is characterized by the combined effect of five principal features: incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies; an eternal present.

Technological innovation has a long history, and is an essential component of capitalist society, sometimes described as industrial or post-industrial. But since its most recent acceleration (in the aftermath of the Second World War) it has greatly reinforced

spectacular authority, by surrendering everybody to the mercy of specialists, to their calculations and to the judgments which always depend on them. The integration of state and economy is the most evident trend of the century; it is at the very least the motor of all recent economic developments. The defensive and offensive pact concluded between these two powers, economy and state, has provided them with the greatest common advantages in every field: each may be said to own the other; at any rate, it is absurd to oppose them, or to distinguish between their reasons and follies. This union, too, has proved to be highly favorable to the development of spectacular domination -- indeed, the two have been indistinguishable from the very start. The other three features are direct effects of this domination, in its integrated stage.

Generalised secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the last analysis, as its most vital operation.

The simple fact of being unanswerable has given what is false an entirely new quality. At a stroke it is truth which has almost everywhere ceased to exist or, at best, has been reduced to the status of pure hypothesis. Unanswerable lies have succeeded in eliminating public opinion, which first lost the ability to make itself

heard and then very quickly dissolved altogether. This evidently has significant consequences for politics, the applied sciences, the legal system and the arts.

The manufacture of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt, which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, is achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries. Meanwhile news of what is genuinely important, of what is actually changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and starts. It always concerns this world's apparent condemnation of its own existence, the stages in its programmed self-destruction.

## **VI.**

Spectacular domination's first priority was to eradicate historical knowledge in general; beginning with just about all rational information and commentary on the most recent past. The evidence for this is so glaring it hardly needs further explanation. With consummate skill the spectacle organizes ignorance of what is about to happen and, immediately afterwards, the forgetting of whatever has nonetheless been understood. The more important something is, the more it is hidden. Nothing in the last



twenty years has been so thoroughly coated in obedient lies as the history of May 1968. Some useful lessons have indeed been learnt from certain demystifying studies of those days; these, however, remain state secrets.

In France, it is some ten years now since a president of the republic, long ago forgotten but at the time still basking on the spectacle's surface, naively expressed his delight at "knowing that henceforth we will live in a world without memory, where images flow and merge, like reflections on the water." Convenient indeed for those in business, and who know how to stay there. The end of history gives power a welcome break. Success is guaranteed in all its undertakings, or at least the rumor of success.

How drastically any absolute power will suppress history depends on the extent of its imperious interests or obligations, and especially on its practical capacity to execute its aims. Ts'in Che Hoang Ti had books burned, but he never managed to get rid of all of them. In our own century Stalin went further, yet despite the various accomplices he managed to find outside his empire's borders, there remained a vast area of the world beyond the reach of his police, where his schemes could be ridiculed. With its new techniques now adopted globally, the integrated spectacle has done much better. Ineptitude compels

universal respect; it is no longer permitted to laugh at it. In any case, it has become impossible to show that one is laughing.

History's domain was the memorable, the totality of events whose consequences would be lastingly apparent. And thus, inseparably, history was knowledge that should endure and aid in understanding, at least in part, what was to come: "an everlasting possession," according to Thucydides. In this way history was the measure of genuine novelty. It is in the interests of those who sell novelty at any price to eradicate the means of measuring it. When social significance is attributed only to what is immediate, and to what will be immediate immediately afterwards, always replacing another, identical, immediacy, it can be seen that the uses of the media guarantee a kind of eternity of noisy insignificance.

The precious advantage which the spectacle has acquired through the outlawing of history, from having driven the recent past into hiding, and from having made everyone forget the spirit of history within society, is above all the ability to cover its own tracks -- to conceal the very progress of its recent world conquest. Its power already seems familiar, as if it had always been there. All usurpers have shared this aim: to make us forget that they have only just arrived.

## VII.

With the destruction of history, contemporary events themselves retreat into a remote and fabulous realm of unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning. For every imbecility presented by the spectacle, there are only the media's professionals to give an answer, with a few respectful rectifications or remonstrations. And they are hardly extravagant, even with these, for besides their extreme ignorance, their personal and professional solidarity with the spectacle's overall authority and the society it expresses makes it their duty, and their pleasure, never to diverge from that authority whose majesty must not be threatened. It must not be forgotten that every media professional is bound by wages and other rewards and recompenses to a master, and sometimes to several; and that every one of them knows he is dispensable.

All experts serve the state and the media and only in that way do they achieve their status. Every expert follows his master, for all former possibilities for independence have been gradually reduced to nil by present society's mode of organization. The most useful expert, of course, is the one who can lie. With their different motives, those who need experts are falsifiers and fools. Whenever individuals lose the capacity to see things for themselves, the expert is

there to offer an absolute reassurance. Once there were experts in Etruscan art, and competent ones, for Etruscan art was not for sale. But a period which, for example, finds it profitable to fake by chemical means various famous wines, can only sell them if it has created wine experts able to connoisseurs into admiring their new, more distinctive, flavors.[2] Cervantes remarks that "under a poor cloak you commonly find a good drinker." [3] Someone who knows his wine may often understand nothing about the rules of the nuclear industry, but spectacular power calculates that if one expert can make a fool of him with nuclear energy, another can easily do the same with wine. And it is well known, for example, that media meteorologists, forecasting temperature or rainfall for the next forty-eight hours, are severely limited in what they say by the obligation to maintain certain economic, touristic and regional balances, when so many people make so many journeys on so many roads, between so many equally desolate places; thus they can only try to make their names as entertainers.

One aspect of the disappearance of all objective historical knowledge can be seen in the way that individual reputations have become malleable and alterable at will by those who control all information: information which is gathered and also -- an entirely different matter -- information which

is broadcast. Their ability to falsify is thus unlimited. Historical evidence which the spectacle does not need to know ceases to be evidence. When the only fame is that bestowed by the grace and favor of a spectacular Court, disgrace may swiftly follow. An anti-spectacular notoriety has become something extremely rare. I myself am one of the last people to retain one, having never had any other. But it has also become extraordinarily suspect. Society has officially declared itself to be spectacular. To be known outside spectacular relations is already to be known as an enemy of society.

A person's past can be entirely rewritten, radically altered, recreated in the manner of the Moscow trials -- and without even having to bother with anything as clumsy as a trial. Killing comes cheaper these days. Those who run the spectacle, or their friends, surely have no lack of false witnesses, though they may be unskilled -- and how could the spectators who witness the exploits of these false witnesses ever recognize their blunders? -- or false documents, which are always highly effective. Thus it is no longer possible to believe anything about anyone that you have not learned for yourself, directly. But in fact false accusations are rarely necessary. Once one controls the mechanism which operates the only form of social verification to be fully and universally recognized, one can say what one likes. The spectacle proves its

arguments simply by going round in circles: by coming back to the start, by repetition, by constant reaffirmation in the only space left where anything can be publicly affirmed, and believed, precisely because that is the only thing to which everyone is witness. Spectacular power can similarly deny whatever it likes, once, or three times over, and change the subject, knowing full well there is no danger of any riposte, in its own space or any other.

For the agora, the general community, has gone, along with communities restricted to intermediary bodies or to independent institutions, to salons or cafes, or to workers in a single company. There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it. Nothing remains of the relatively independent judgment of those who once made up the world of learning; of those, for example, who used to base their self-respect on their ability to verify, to come close to an impartial history of facts, or at least to believe that such a history deserved to be known. There is no longer even any incontestable bibliographical truth, and the computerized catalogues of national libraries are well-equipped to remove any residual traces. It is disorienting to consider what it meant to be a judge, a doctor or a

historian not so long ago, and to recall the obligations and imperatives they often accepted, within the limits of their competence: men resemble their times more than their fathers.[4]

When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist. For it has then gone on to talk about something else, and it is that which henceforth, in short, exists. The practical consequences, as we see, are enormous.

We believe we know that in Greece, history and democracy entered the world at the same time. We can prove that their disappearances have also been simultaneous.

To this list of the triumphs of power we should, however, add one result which has proved negative: once the running of a state involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that state can no longer be led strategically.

## VIII.

Once it attains the stage of the integrated spectacle, self-proclaimed democratic society seems to be generally accepted as the realization of a fragile perfection. So that it must no longer be exposed to attacks, being fragile; and indeed is no longer open

to attack, being perfect as no other society before it. It is a fragile society because it has great difficulty managing its dangerous technological expansion. But it is a perfect society for governing; and the proof is that all those who aspire to govern want to govern this one, in the same way, changing hardly a thing. For the first time in contemporary Europe no party or fraction of a party even tries to pretend that they wish to change anything significant. The commodity is beyond criticism: as a general system and even as the particular forms of junk which heads of industry choose to put on the market at any given time.

Wherever the spectacle has its dominion the only organized forces are those which want the spectacle. Thus no one can be the enemy of what exists, nor transgress the omerta which applies to everything. We have dispensed with that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or revolution. Not thanks to any new arguments, but quite simply because all argument has become useless. From this result we can estimate not universal happiness, but the redoubtable strength of tyranny's tentacles.

Never before has censorship been so perfect. Never before have those who are still led to believe, in a few countries, that



they remain free citizens, been less entitled to make their opinions heard, wherever it is a matter of choices affecting their real lives. Never before has it been possible to lie to them so brazenly. The spectator is simply supposed to know nothing, and deserve nothing. Those who are always watching to see what happens next will never act: such must be the spectator's condition. People often cite the United States as an exception because there Nixon eventually came to grief with a series of denials whose clumsiness was too cynical: but this entirely local exception, for which there were some old historical causes, clearly no longer holds true, since Reagan has recently been able to do the same thing with impunity. Many things may be unauthorized; everything is permitted. Talk of scandal is thus archaic. The most profound summing up of the period which the whole world entered shortly after Italy and the United States, can be found in the words of a senior Italian statesman, a member, simultaneously, of both the official government and the parallel government, P2, Potere Due: "Once there were scandals, but not any more."

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx described the state's encroachment upon Second Empire France, then blessed with half a million bureaucrats: "[Everything was] made a subject for governmental activity, whether it was a bridge, a schoolhouse, the communal

property of a village community, or the railways, the national wealth and the national university of France." The famous question of the funding of political parties was already being posed, for Marx noted that, "The parties that strove in turn for mastery regarded possession of this immense state edifice as the main booty for the victor." Yet this may nonetheless sound somewhat bucolic and out of date, at a time when the state's speculations involve new towns and highways, channel tunnels and nuclear energy, oil wells and computers, the administration of banks and cultural centers, the modification of the 'audiovisual landscape' and secret arms exports, property speculation and pharmaceuticals, agribusiness and hospitals, military credits and the secret funds of the ever-expanding departments charged with running society's numerous defense services. But Marx unfortunately remains all too up to date when in the same book he describes this government, which "rather than deciding by night, and striking by day, decides by day and strikes by night."

## **IX.**

Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results. The story of terrorism is written by the state and it is therefore highly

instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic.

The modernization of repression has succeeded in perfecting -- first in the Italian pilot-project under the name of *pentiti* -- sworn professional accusers; a phenomenon first seen in the seventeenth century after the Fronde, when such people were called 'certified witnesses.' This spectacular judicial progress has filled Italy's prisons with thousands of people condemned to do penance for a civil war which did not take place, a kind of mass armed insurrection which, by chance, never actually happened, a putsch woven of such stuff as dreams are made on.

It can be seen that interpretations of terrorism's mysteries appear to have brought about a symmetry between contradictory views, rather like two schools of philosophy adhering to absolutely incompatible metaphysical systems. Some would see terrorism as simply a number of acts of blatant manipulation on the part of the secret services; others would reproach the terrorists for their total lack of historical understanding. But a little historical logic should rapidly convince us that there is nothing contradictory in recognizing that

people who understand nothing of history can readily be manipulated; even more so than others. And it is much easier to lead someone to 'repent' when it can be shown that everything he thought he did freely was actually known in advance. It is an inevitable consequence of clandestine, military forms of organization that a few infiltrators can activate, and eliminate, a lot of people. Criticism, when evaluating armed struggles, must sometimes analyze particular operations without being led astray by the general resemblance that will finally be imposed on all of them. We should expect, as a logical possibility, that the state's security services intend to use all the advantages they find in the realm of the spectacle, which has indeed been organized with that in mind for some considerable time: on the contrary, it is a difficulty in perceiving this which is astonishing, and rings false.

Judicial repression's present objective here, of course, is to generalize matters as fast as possible. What is important in this commodity is the packing, or the labeling: the price codes. One enemy of spectacular democracy is the same as another, just like spectacular democracies themselves. Thus there must be no right of asylum for terrorists, and even those who have not yet been accused of being terrorists can certainly become them, with extradition swiftly following. In November 1978, dealing with the case of a young print worker, Gabor

Winter, wanted by the West German government mainly for having printed certain revolutionary leaflets, Mlle Nicole Pradain, acting on behalf of the Department of Public Prosecution in the Appeal Court of Paris, quickly showed that the 'political motives' which could be the only grounds for refusing extradition under the Franco-German agreement of 29 November 1951, could not be invoked: "Gabor Winter is a social criminal, not a political one. He refuses to accept social constraints. A true political criminal doesn't reject society. He attacks political structures and not, like Gabor Winter, social structures."

The notion of acceptable political crime only became recognized in Europe once the bourgeoisie had successfully attacked previous social structures. The nature of political crime could not be separated from the varied objectives of social critique. This was true for Blanqui, Varlin, Durruti. Nowadays there is a pretense of wishing to preserve a purely political crime, like some inexpensive luxury, a crime which doubtless no one will ever have the occasion to commit again, since no one is interested in the subject any more; except for the professional politicians themselves, whose crimes are rarely pursued, nor for that matter called political. All crimes and offenses are effectively social. But of all social crimes, none must be seen as worse than the impertinent claim to still want to change

something in a society which has so far been only too kind and patient, but has had enough of being blamed.

## X.

According to the basic interests of the new system of domination, the dissolution of logic has been pursued by different, but mutually supportive, means. Some of these means involve the technology which the spectacle has tested and popularized; others are more linked to the mass psychology of submission.

At the technological level, when images chosen and constructed by someone else have everywhere become the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed for himself, it has certainly not been forgotten that these images can tolerate anything and everything; because within the same image all things can be juxtaposed without contradiction. The flow of images carries everything before it, and it is similarly someone else who controls at will this simplified summary of the sensible world; who decides where the flow will lead as well as the rhythm of what should be shown, like some perpetual, arbitrary surprise, leaving no time for reflection, and entirely independent of what the spectator might understand or think of it. In this concrete

experience of permanent submission lies the psychological origin of such general acceptance of what is; an acceptance which comes to find in it, ipso facto, a sufficient value. Beyond what is strictly secret, spectacular discourse obviously silences anything it finds inconvenient. It isolates all it shows from its context, its past, its intentions and its consequences. It is thus completely illogical. Since no one may contradict it, it has the right to contradict itself, to correct its own past. The arrogant intention of its servants, when they have to put forward some new, and perhaps still more dishonest version of certain facts, is to harshly correct the ignorance and misinterpretations they attribute to their public, while the day before they themselves were busily disseminating the error, with their habitual assurance. Thus the spectacle's instruction and the spectators' ignorance are wrongly seen as antagonistic factors when in fact they give birth to each other. In the same way, the computer's binary language is an irresistible inducement to the continual and unreserved acceptance of what has been programmed according to the wishes of someone else and passes for the timeless source of a superior, impartial and total logic. Such progress, such speed, such breadth of vocabulary! Political? Social? Make your choice. You cannot have both. My own choice is inescapable. They are jeering at us, and we know whom these programs are for. [5] Thus

it is hardly surprising that children should enthusiastically start their education at an early age with the Absolute Knowledge of computer science; while they are still unable to read, for reading demands making judgments at every line; and is the only access to the wealth of pre-spectacular human experience. Conversation is almost dead, and soon so too will be those who knew how to speak.

The primary cause of the decadence of contemporary thought evidently lies in the fact that spectacular discourse leaves no room for any reply; while logic was only socially constructed through dialogue. Furthermore, when respect for those who speak through the spectacle is so widespread, when they are held to be rich, important, prestigious, to be authority itself, the spectators tend to want to be just as illogical as the spectacle, thereby proudly displaying an individual reflection of this authority. And finally, logic is not easy, and no one has tried to teach it. Drug addicts do not study logic; they no longer need it, nor are they capable of it. The spectator's laziness is shared by all intellectual functionaries and overnight specialists, all of whom do their best to conceal the narrow limits of their knowledge by the dogmatic repetition of arguments with illogical authority.



## XI.

It is generally believed that those who have displayed the greatest incapacity in matters of logic are self-proclaimed revolutionaries. This unjustified reproach dates from an age when almost everyone thought with some minimum of logic, with the striking exception of cretins and militants; and in the case of the latter bad faith played its part, intentionally, because it was held to be effective. But today there is no escaping the fact that intense absorption of the spectacle has, as we should have expected, turned most of our contemporaries into ideologues, if only in fits and starts, bits and pieces. Absence of logic, that is to say, loss of the ability immediately to perceive what is significant and what is insignificant or irrelevant, what is incompatible or what could well be complementary, all that a particular consequence implies and at the same time all that it excludes -- high doses of this disease have been intentionally injected into the population by the spectacle's anaesthetists/resuscitators. Rebels have certainly not been any more illogical than passive victims. It is simply that the former display a more intense manifestation of the generalized irrationality, because while parading their aims and programmes they have actually tried to carry out practical projects -- even if it is only to read certain texts and show that they know what they mean. They have committed themselves to

overcoming logic, even at the level of strategy, which is precisely the entire operational field of the dialectical logic of conflicts; but, like everyone else, they lack the basic ability to orient themselves by the old, imperfect tools of formal logic. No one worries about them; and hardly anyone thinks about the others.

The individual who has been more deeply marked by this impoverished spectacular thought than by any other aspect of his experience puts himself at the service of the established order right from the start, even though subjectively he may have had quite the opposite intention. He will essentially follow the language of the spectacle, for it is the only one he is familiar with; the one in which he learned to speak. No doubt he would like to be regarded as an enemy of its rhetoric; but he will use its syntax. This is one of the most important aspects of spectacular domination's success.

The swift disappearance of our former vocabulary is merely one moment in this process. It helps it along.

## **XII.**

The erasure of the personality is the fatal accompaniment to an existence which is concretely submissive to the spectacle's rules, ever more removed from the

possibility of authentic experience and thus from the discovery of individual preferences. Paradoxically, permanent self-denial is the price the individual pays for the tiniest bit of social status. Such an existence demands a fluid fidelity, a succession of continually disappointing commitments to false products. It is a matter of running hard to keep up with the inflation of devalued signs of life. Drugs help one to come to terms with this state of affairs, while madness allows one to escape from it.

In all sorts of business in this society, where the distribution of goods is centralized in such a way that it determines -- both notoriously and secretly -- the very definition of what could be desirable, it sometimes happens that certain people are attributed with knowledge, qualities, or even vices, all entirely imaginary, in order to explain the satisfactory development of particular enterprises. The only aim is to hide, or at least to disguise as far as possible, the working of various agreements which decide everything. Yet despite its frequent intentions, and the redoubtable means at its disposal, to highlight the full stature of supposedly remarkable personalities, present society more often only succeeds in demonstrating quite the opposite, and not merely in what has today replaced the arts, or discussion of the arts. One total incompetent will collide with another; panic ensues and it is then simply a matter of who

will fall apart first. A lawyer, for example, forgetting that he is supposed to represent one side in a trial, will be genuinely swayed by the arguments of his opposite number, even when these arguments are as hollow as his own. It can also happen that an innocent suspect temporarily confesses to a crime he did not commit simply because he is impressed by the logic of an informer who wants him to believe he is guilty (see the case of Dr. Archambeau in Poitiers, in 1984).

[6] McLuhan himself, the spectacle's first apologist, who had seemed to be the most convinced imbecile of the century, changed his mind when he finally discovered in 1976 that "the pressure of the mass media leads to irrationality," and that it was becoming urgent to modify their usage. The sage of Toronto had formerly spent several decades marveling at the numerous freedoms created by a 'global village' instantly and effortlessly accessible to all. Villages, unlike towns, have always been ruled by conformism, isolation, petty surveillance, boredom and repetitive malicious gossip about the same families. Which is a precise enough description of the global spectacle's present vulgarity, in which it has become impossible to distinguish the Grimaldi-Monaco or Bourbon-Franco dynasties from those who succeeded the Stuarts. However, McLuhan's ungrateful modern disciples are now trying to make people forget him, hoping to establish their own careers in media celebration of all these new freedoms

to 'choose' at random from ephemera. And no doubt they will retract their claims even faster than the man who inspired them.

### **XIII.**

The spectacle makes no secret of the fact that certain dangers surround the wonderful order it has established. Ocean pollution and the destruction of equatorial forests threaten oxygen renewal; the earth's ozone layer is menaced by industrial growth; nuclear radiation accumulates irreversibly. It merely concludes that none of these things matter. It will only talk about dates and measures. And on these alone, it is successfully reassuring -- something which a pre-spectacular mind would have thought impossible. Spectacular democracy approaches matters with great subtlety, very different from the straightforward brutality of the totalitarian diktat. It can keep the original name for something secretly changed (beer, beef or philosophers). And it can just as easily change the name when the thing itself has been secretly maintained. In England, for example, the nuclear waste reprocessing plant at Windscale was renamed Sellafield in order to allay the suspicions which were aroused by a disastrous fire in 1957, though this toponymic reprocessing did nothing to limit the rise in local mortality rates from cancer and leukemia. The British government, as

the population democratically learned thirty years later, had decided to suppress a report on the catastrophe which it judged, reasonably enough, would probably shake public confidence in nuclear power. The nuclear industry, both military and civil, demands a far higher dose of secrecy than in other fields -- which already have plenty, as we know. To make life -- that is to say, lying -- easier for the sages chosen by the system's masters, it has been found useful also to change measurements, to vary them according to a large number of criteria, and refine them, so as to be able to juggle as necessary with a range of figures which are hard to convert. Hence, to measure radioactivity levels, one can choose from a range of units of measurement curies, becquerels, roentgens, rads alias centigrays, and rems, not forgetting the humble millirads, and sieverts which are worth 100 rems. It reminds one of the old subdivisions of British currency which foreigners found so confusing, back in the days when Sellafield was still called Windscale. One can imagine the rigor and precision which would have been achieved in the nineteenth century by military history, and thus by theorists of strategy, if, so as not to give too much confidential information to neutral commentators or enemy historians, campaigns were invariably described in the following manner:

"The preliminary phase involved a series of engagements in which, from our side, a strong advance force made up of four generals and the units under their command, met an enemy force of 13,000 bayonets. In the subsequent phase a fiercely disputed pitched battle developed, in which our entire army advanced, with 290 canons and a heavy cavalry of 18,000 sabers; the confronting enemy alignment comprised no less than 3,600 infantry lieutenants, 40 captains of hussars and 24 of cuirassiers. Following alternate advances and retreats on both sides, the battle can finally be seen as inconclusive. Our losses, somewhat lower than the average figure normally expected in combat of similar duration and intensity, were appreciably superior to those of the Greeks at Marathon, but remained inferior to those of the Prussians at Jena."

In this example, it is not impossible for a specialist to gather some vague idea of the forces engaged. But the conduct of operations remains securely concealed. In June 1987, Pierre Bacher, deputy director of installations at Electricite de France,

revealed the latest safety doctrine for nuclear power stations. By installing valves and filters it becomes much easier to avoid major catastrophes, like cracks or explosions in the reactors, which would affect a whole 'region.' Such catastrophes are produced by excessive containment. Whenever the plant looks like blowing, it is better to decompress gently, showering only a restricted area of a few kilometers, an area which on each occasion will be differently and haphazardly extended depending on the wind. He discloses that in the past two years discreet experiments carried out at Cadarache, in the Drome, "clearly showed that waste gas essentially is infinitesimal, representing at worst one per cent of the radioactivity in the power station itself." Thus a very moderate worst case: one per cent. Formerly, we were assured there was no risk at all, except in the case of accidents, which were logically impossible. The experience of the first few years changed this reasoning as follows: since accidents can always happen, what must be avoided is their reaching a catastrophic threshold, and that is easy. All that is necessary is to contaminate little by little, in moderation. Who would not agree that it is infinitely healthier to limit yourself to an intake of 140 centilitres of vodka per day for several years, rather than getting drunk right away like the Poles? It is indeed unfortunate that human society should encounter such burning problems just when it has become materially impossible to make



heard the least objection to the language of the commodity, just when power -- quite rightly because it is shielded by the spectacle from any response to its piecemeal and delirious decisions and justifications -- believes that it no longer needs to think; and indeed can no longer think. Would not even the staunchest democrat have preferred to have been given more intelligent masters? At the international conference of experts held in Geneva in December 1986, the question was quite simply whether to introduce a worldwide ban on the production of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), the gases which have recently and rapidly started to destroy the thin layer of ozone, which as will be recalled protects this planet against the harmful effects of solar rays. Daniel Verilhe, representing Elf-Aquitaine's chemicals subsidiary, and in this capacity part of a French delegation firmly opposed to any ban, made a sensible point, "it will take at least three years to develop substitutes and the costs will be quadrupled." As we know, this fugitive ozone layer, so high up, belongs to no one and has no market value. This industrial strategist could thus show his opponents the extent of their inexplicable disregard for economics: "It is highly dangerous to base an industrial strategy on environmental imperatives." Those who long ago had embarked on a critique of political economy by defining it as "the final denial of humanity" were not

mistaken. [7] This will be seen as its defining characteristic.

#### **XIV.**

It is sometimes said that science today is subservient to the imperatives of profit, but that is nothing new. What is new is the way the economy has now come to declare open war on humanity, attacking not only our possibilities for living, but our chances of survival. It is here that science -- renouncing the opposition to slavery that formed a significant part of its own history -- has chosen to put itself at the service of spectacular domination. Until it got to this point, science possessed a relative autonomy. It knew how to understand its own portion of reality and in this has made an immense contribution to increasing economic resources. When an all-powerful economy lost its reason -- and that is precisely what defines these spectacular times -- it suppressed the last vestiges of scientific autonomy, both in methodology and, by the same token, in the practical working conditions of its 'researchers.' No longer is science asked to understand the world, or to improve any part of it. It is asked instead to immediately justify everything that happens. As stupid in this field, which it exploits with the most ruinous disregard, as it is everywhere else, spectacular domination has cut down the

vast tree of scientific knowledge in order to make itself a truncheon. To obey this ultimate social demand for a manifestly impossible justification, it is better not to be able to think at all, but rather to be well trained in the conveniences of spectacular language. And it is in such a career that the prostituted science of our despicable times has found its latest specialization, with goodwill and alacrity. The science of lying justifications naturally appeared with the first symptoms of bourgeois society's decadence, with the cancerous proliferation of those pseudo-sciences known as 'human'; yet modern medicine, for example, had once been able to pass as useful, and those who eradicated smallpox or leprosy were very different from those who contemptibly capitulated in the face of nuclear radiation or chemical farming. It can readily be seen, of course, that medicine today no longer has the right to defend public health against a pathogenic environment, for that would be to challenge the state, or at least the pharmaceuticals industry. But it is not only by its obligation to keep quiet that contemporary science acknowledges what it has become. It is also by its frequent and artless outbursts. In November 1985, professors Even and Andrieu at Laennec hospital announced that they had perhaps found an effective cure for AIDS, following an experiment on four patients which had lasted a week. Two days later, the patients having died, several other doctors, whose

research was not so far advanced, or who were perhaps jealous, expressed certain reservations as to the professors' precipitate haste in broadcasting what was merely the misleading appearance of victory -- a few hours before the patients' condition finally deteriorated. Even and Andrieu defended themselves nonchalantly, arguing that "after all, false hopes are better than no hope at all." Their ignorance was too great for them to recognize this argument as a precise and complete disavowal of the spirit of science; as the one which had historically always served to endorse the profitable daydreams of charlatans and sorcerers, long before such people were put in charge of hospitals. When official science has come to such a pass, like all the rest of the social spectacle that for all its materially modernized and enhanced presentation is merely reviving the ancient techniques of fairground mountebanks -- illusionists, bankers and stool-pigeons -- it is not surprising to see a similar and widespread revival of the authority of seers and sects, of vacuum-packed Zen or Mormon theology. [8] Ignorance, which has always served the authorities well, has also always been exploited by ingenious ventures on the fringes of the law. And what better moment than one where illiteracy has become so widespread? But this reality in its turn is denied by a new display of sorcery. From its inception, UNESCO had adopted a very precise scientific definition of the illiteracy

which it strove to combat in backward countries. When the same phenomenon was unexpectedly seen to be returning, but this time in the so-called advanced nations, rather in the way that the one who was waiting for Grouchy instead saw Blucher join the battle, it was simply a matter of calling in the Guard of experts; [9] they carried the day with a single, unstoppable assault, replacing the word illiteracy by 'language difficulties': just as a 'false patriot' can sometimes arrive at an opportune moment to support a good national cause. And to ensure that the pertinence of this neologism was, between pedagogues, carved in stone, a new definition was quickly handed round -- as if it had always been accepted -- according to which, while the illiterate was, as we know, someone who had never learnt to read, those with language difficulties in the modern sense are on the contrary people who had learnt to read (and had even learnt better than before, coolly proposed the more gifted official theorists and historians of pedagogy), but who had by chance immediately forgotten again. This surprising explanation might have been more disturbing than reassuring, if, by deliberately missing the point, it had not skillfully sidestepped the first consequence which would have come to anyone's mind in more scientific eras. That is, the recognition that this new phenomenon had itself to be explained and combated, since it had never been observed or even imagined anywhere

before the recent progress of damaged thought, when analytical and practical decadence go hand in hand.

## XV.

More than a century ago, A.-L. Sardou's *Nouveau Dictionnaire des Synonymes Francais* defined the nuances which must be grasped between fallacious, deceptive, impostrous, inveigling, insidious, captious; and which taken together constitute today a kind of palette of colors with which to paint a portrait of the society of the spectacle. It was beyond the scope of his time, and his specialist experience, for Sardou to distinguish with equal clarity the related, but very different, meanings of the perils normally expected to be faced by any group which practices subversion, following, for example, this progression: misguided, provoked, infiltrated, manipulated, taken over, subverted. Certainly these important nuances have never been appreciated by the doctrinaires of 'armed struggle.' Fallacious [fallacieux], from the Latin fallaciosus, adept at or accustomed to deception, full of deceit: the definition of this adjective is equivalent to the superlative of deceptive [trompeur]. That which deceives or leads into error in any way is deceptive: that which is done in order to deceive, abuse, lead into error by plan intended to deceive with artifice and misleading confidence most calculated to

abuse, is fallacious. Deceptive is a generic and vague word; all forms of uncertain signs and appearance are deceptive: fallacious denotes duplicity, deceit, studied imposture; sophistic speech, asseveration or reasoning is fallacious. The word has affinities with impostrous [imposteur], inveigling [seducteur], insidious [insidieux] and captious [captieux], but without equivalence. Impostrous denotes all forms of false appearance, or conspiracies to abuse or injure; for example, hypocrisy, calumny, etc. Inveigling expresses action calculated to take possession of someone, to lead them astray by artful and insinuating means. Insidious only indicates the act of placing traps and entrapping. Captious is restricted to the subtle act of taking by surprise and taking in. Fallacious encompasses most of these definitions.

## **XVI.**

The relatively new concept of disinformation was recently imported from Russia, along with a number of other inventions useful in the running of modern states. It is openly employed by particular powers, or, consequently, by people who hold fragments of economic or political authority, in order to maintain what is established; and always in a counter-offensive role. Whatever can oppose a single official truth must necessarily be disinformation emanating

from hostile or at least rival powers, and would have been intentionally and malevolently falsified. Disinformation would not be simple negation of a fact which suits the authorities, or the simple affirmation of a fact which does not suit them: that is called psychosis. Unlike the straightforward lie, disinformation must inevitably contain a degree of truth but one deliberately manipulated by an artful enemy. That is what makes it so attractive to the defenders of the dominant society. The power which speaks of disinformation does not believe itself to be absolutely faultless, but knows that it can attribute to any precise criticism the excessive insignificance which characterizes disinformation; with the result that it will never have to admit to any particular fault.

In essence, disinformation would be a travesty of the truth. Whoever disseminates it is culpable, whoever believes it is stupid. But who precisely would this artful enemy be? In this case, it cannot be terrorism, which is in no danger of 'disinforming' anyone, since it is charged with ontologically representing the grossest and least acceptable error. Thanks to its etymology and to present memories of those limited confrontations which, around mid-century, briefly opposed East and West, concentrated spectacle and diffuse spectacle, the capitalism of today's integrated spectacle still pretends to believe that the capitalism



of bureaucratic totalitarianism -- sometimes even presented as the terrorists' base camp or inspiration -- remains its fundamental enemy, despite the innumerable proofs of their profound alliance and solidarity. But actually all established powers, despite certain genuine local rivalries, and without ever wanting to spell it out, never forget what one of the rare German internationalists after the outbreak of the First World War managed to recall (on the side of subversion and without any great immediate success): "The main enemy is within." In the end, disinformation is the equivalent of what was represented in the nineteenth-century language of social war as 'dangerous passions.' It is all that is obscure and threatens to oppose the unprecedented happiness which we know this society offers to those who trust it, a happiness which greatly outweighs various insignificant risks and disappointments. And everyone who sees this happiness in the spectacle agrees that we should not grumble about its price; everyone else is a disinformant.

The other advantage derived from denouncing a particular instance of disinformation in this way is that it wards off any suspicion that the spectacle's global language might contain the same thing. With the most scientific assurance, the spectacle can identify the only place where disinformation could be found: in anything which can be said that might displease it.

It is doubtless by mistake -- unless it be a deliberate decoy -- that a project was recently set in motion in France to place a kind of official label on some parts of the media guaranteeing them 'free from disinformation.' This wounded certain media professionals, who still believe, or more modestly would still like it to be believed, that until now they had not actually been subject to censorship. But the concept of disinformation must never be used defensively, still less as part of a static defense, building a Great Wall or Maginot Line around an area supposedly out of bounds to disinformation. There must be disinformation, and it must be something fluid and potentially ubiquitous. Where the language of the spectacle is not under attack it would be foolish to defend it, and the concept would wear out very fast indeed if one were to try to defend it against all the evidence on points which ought on the contrary to be kept from public view. Moreover the authorities have no real need to guarantee that any particular information does not contain disinformation. Nor have they the means to do so: they are not respected to that extent, and would only draw down suspicion on the information concerned. The concept of disinformation is only valid for counter-attack. It must be kept in reserve, then rapidly thrown into the fray to drive back any truth which has managed to get through.

If occasionally a kind of unregulated disinformation threatens to appear, in the service of particular interests temporarily in conflict, and threatens to be believed, getting out of control and thus clashing with the concerted work of a less irresponsible disinformation, there is no reason to fear that the former involves other manipulators who are more subtle or more skilled: it is simply because disinformation now spreads in a world where there is no room for verification.

The confusionist concept of disinformation is pushed into the limelight immediately to refute, by its very name, any criticism that has failed to be eliminated by the diverse agencies of the organization of silence. For example it could one day be said, should this seem desirable, that this text was an attempt to disinform about the spectacle; or indeed, since it is the same thing, that it was a piece of disinformation harmful to democracy.

Contrary to its spectacular definition, the practice of disinformation can only serve the state here and now, under its direct command, or at the initiative of those who uphold the same values. Disinformation is actually inherent in all existing information; and indeed is its main characteristic. It is only named where passivity must be maintained by intimidation. Where disinformation is named it does not exist. Where it exists, it is not named.

When there were still conflicting ideologies, which claimed to be for or against some recognized aspect of reality, there were fanatics, and liars, but there were no 'disinformers.' When respect for the spectacular consensus, or at least a desire for spectacular kudos prohibits any honest declaration of what someone is against, or equally what he wholeheartedly approves; and when at the same time he needs to disguise a part of what he is supposed to acknowledge because for one reason or another it is considered dangerous, then he employs disinformation, as if by blunder or negligence, or by pretended false reasoning. In political activity after 1968, for example, the incompetent recuperators known as 'pro-situs,' became the first disinformers because they did their best to hide all practical manifestations which confirmed the critique they claimed to have adopted; and, without the slightest embarrassment at weakening its expression, never referred to anything or anyone, in order to suggest that they themselves had actually discovered something.

## **XVII.**

Reversing Hegel's famous maxim, I noted as long ago as 1967 that "in a world that has really been turned upside down, truth is a moment of falsehood." In the intervening

years, this principle has encroached upon each specific domain, without exception.

Thus in an era when contemporary art can no longer exist, it becomes difficult to judge classical art. Here as elsewhere, ignorance is only created in order to be exploited. As the meanings of history and taste are lost, networks of falsification are organized. It is only necessary to control the experts and auctioneers, which is easy enough, to arrange everything, since in this kind of business -- and at the end of the day in every other kind -- it is the sale which authenticates the value. Afterwards it is the collectors and museums, particularly in America, who, gorged on falsehood, will have an interest in upholding its good reputation, just as the International Monetary Fund maintains the fiction of a positive value in the huge debts of dozens of countries.

What is false creates taste, and reinforces itself by knowingly eliminating any possible reference to the authentic. And what is genuine is reconstructed as quickly as possible, to resemble the false. Being the richest and the most modern, the Americans have been the main dupes of this traffic in false art. And they are exactly the same people who pay for restoration work at Versailles or in the Sistine Chapel. This is why Michelangelo's frescoes will acquire the fresh, bright colors of a cartoon strip, and

the genuine furniture at Versailles, the sparkling gilt which will make them resemble the fake Louis XIV suites imported by Texans at such great expense.

Feuerbach's judgment on the fact that his time preferred "the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality," has been thoroughly vindicated by the century of the spectacle, and in several spheres where the nineteenth century preferred to keep its distance from what was already its fundamental nature: industrial capitalism. Thus it was that the bourgeoisie had widely disseminated the rigorous mentality of the museum, the original object, precise historical criticism, the authentic document. Today, however, the tendency to replace the real with the artificial is ubiquitous. In this regard, it is fortuitous that traffic pollution has necessitated the replacement of the Marly Horses in place de la Concorde, or the Roman statues in the doorway of Saint-Trophime in Arles, by plastic replicas. Everything will be more beautiful than before, for the tourists' cameras.

The high point in this process has doubtless been reached by the Chinese bureaucracy's laughable fake of the vast terra-cotta industrial army of the First Emperor, which so many visiting statesmen have been taken to admire in situ. A clear demonstration, since it was possible to fool them so cruelly,

that in all their hordes of advisors, there is not one single individual who knows about art history in China, or anywhere else -- 'Your Excellency's computers have no data on this subject.' Such a confirmation of the fact that for the first time in history it is possible to govern without the slightest understanding of art or of what is authentic and what is impossible, could alone suffice to make us suppose that the credulous fools who run the economy and the administration will probably lead the world to some great catastrophe; if their actual practice had not already made that crystal clear.

## **XVIII.**

Our society is built on secrecy, from the 'front' organizations which draw an impenetrable screen over the concentrated wealth of their members, to the 'official secrets' which allow the state a vast field of operation free from any legal constraint; from the often frightening secrets of shoddy production hidden by advertising, to the projections of an extrapolated future, in which domination alone reads off the likely progress of things whose existence it denies, calculating the responses it will mysteriously make. Some observations can be made on these matters.

There are ever more places in cities and in the countryside which remain inaccessible,

that is to say protected and shielded from public gaze; which are out of bounds to the innocently curious, and well guarded against espionage. Without all being strictly military, they follow the military model in preventing any prying incursion by local people or passers-by; or even by the police, whose functions have long been reduced to mere surveillance and repression of the most commonplace forms of delinquency. Thus it was that when Aldo Moro was a prisoner of Potere Due he was held, not in a building which could not be found, but in one which could not be entered.

There are ever more people trained to act in secret; prepared and practiced for that alone. There are special units armed with confidential archives, that is to say, with secret data and analysis. There are others armed with a range of techniques for the exploitation and manipulation of these secrets. And finally there are the 'active' units, equipped with other means to simplify the problems in question.

The resources allocated to these specialists in surveillance and influence continue to increase, while general circumstances favor them more by the year. When, for example, the new conditions of integrated spectacular society have driven its critique into genuine clandestinity, not because it is in hiding but because it is hidden by the ponderous stage-management of diversionary thought, those



who are nonetheless responsible for its surveillance, and in the end for its denial, can now employ traditional methods for operations in clandestine milieus: provocation, infiltration, and various forms of elimination of authentic critique in favor of a false one which will have been created for this purpose. When the spectacle's general imposture is enriched with recourse to a thousand individual impostures, uncertainty grows at every turn. An unexplained crime can also be called suicide, in prison as elsewhere; the collapse of logic allows trials and inquiries which soar into irrationality, and which are frequently falsified right from the start through absurd autopsies, performed by extraordinary experts.

We have long been accustomed to summary executions of all kinds of people. Known terrorists, or those considered as such, are openly fought with terrorist methods. Mossad can arrange the killing of Abou Jihad, the SAS can do the same with Irish people, and the parallel police of GAL [10] with Basques. Those whose killings are arranged by supposed terrorists are not chosen without reason; but it is generally impossible to be sure of understanding these reasons. One can be aware that Bologna railway station was blown up to ensure that Italy continued to be well governed; or of the identity of the 'death squads' in Brazil; or that the Mafia can burn down a hotel in

the United States to facilitate a racket. But how can we know what purpose was ultimately served by the 'mad killers of Brabant'? [11] It is hard to apply the principle *Cui prodest*? where so many active interests are so well concealed. The result is that under the rule of the integrated spectacle, we live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries.

Media/police rumors acquire instantly -- or at worst after three or four repetitions -- the indisputable status of age-old historical evidence. By the legendary authority of the spectacle of the day, odd characters eliminated in silence can reappear as fictive survivors, whose return can always be conjured up or computed, and proved by the mere say-so of specialists. They exist somewhere between the Acheron and the Lethe, these dead whom the spectacle has not properly buried, supposedly slumbering while awaiting the summons which will awake them all: home is the pirate, home from the sea [12], and the terrorist home from the hill; home, too, the thief who no longer needs to steal.

Thus is uncertainty organized everywhere. Often domination will protect itself by false attacks, whose media coverage covers up the true operation. Such was the case with the bizarre assault on the Spanish Cortes by Tejero and his civil guards in 1981, whose failure had to hide another more modern,

that is to say, more disguised pronunciamiento, which succeeded. The equally showy failure of the French secret services' sabotage attempt in New Zealand in 1985 has sometimes been seen as a stratagem, perhaps designed to divert attention from the numerous new uses of these secret services, by persuading people of their caricatural clumsiness both in their choice of target and in their mode of operation. It has most certainly been almost universally accepted that the geological explorations for oil-beds in the subsoil of the city of Paris, so noisily conducted in the autumn of 1986, had no other serious purpose than to measure the inhabitants' current level of stupefaction and submission: by showing them supposed research so absolutely devoid of economic reason.

So mysterious has power become that after the affair of the illegal arms sales to Iran by the US presidency, one might wonder who was really running the United States, the leading power in the so-called democratic world. And thus who the hell was running the democratic world?

More profoundly, in this world which is officially so respectful of economic necessities, no one ever knows the real cost of anything which is produced. In fact the major part of the real cost is never calculated; and the rest is kept secret.

## **XIX.**

At the beginning of 1988, a certain General Noriega suddenly became world famous. He was the unofficial dictator of Panama, a country without an army, where he commanded the National Guard. Panama is not really a sovereign state: it was dug out for its canal, rather than the reverse. Its currency is the dollar, and the army which runs it is similarly foreign. Noriega had thus devoted his entire career -- precisely like [General] Jaruzelski in Poland -- to serving the occupying power as its chief of police. He imported drugs into the United States, since Panama was not bringing him sufficient revenue, and exported his 'Panamanian' capital to Switzerland. He had worked with the CIA against Cuba and, to provide adequate cover for his business activities, had also denounced some of his rivals in the import trade to the US authorities, obsessed as they are with this problem. To the envy of Washington, his chief security advisor was the best on the market: Michael Harari, a former officer with Mossad, the Israeli secret service. When the Americans finally decided to get rid of this character, some of their courts having carelessly condemned him, Noriega proclaimed that he was ready to defend himself for a thousand years -- against foreigners, and against his own rebellious people; in the name of anti-imperialism he

quickly received public support from the more austere bureaucratic dictators in Cuba and Nicaragua.

Far from being a peculiarly Panamanian phenomenon, this General Noriega, who sells everything and fakes everything, in a world which does precisely the same thing, was altogether a perfect representative of the integrated spectacle, and of the successes it allows the assorted managers of its internal and external politics: a sort of statesman in a sort of state, a sort of general, a capitalist. He is the very model of our modern prince, and of those destined to come to power and stay there, the most able resemble him closely. It is not Panama which produces such marvels, it is our times.

## **XX.**

For any intelligence service, following Clausewitz's accurate theory of war, knowledge must become power. From this these services derive their contemporary prestige, their peculiarly poetic quality. Whilst intelligence itself has been so thoroughly expelled from the spectacle, which prohibits action and says very little about the actions of others, it seems to have taken refuge with those who analyze and secretly act on certain realities. The recent revelations that Margaret Thatcher tried in vain to suppress, and in fact confirmed by

the attempt, have shown that in Britain these services have already been capable of bringing down a prime minister whose politics they deemed dangerous. The general contempt created by the spectacle thus, for new reasons, restored the fascination of what in Kipling's day was called 'the great game.'

'The conspiracy theory of history' was in the nineteenth century a reactionary and ridiculous belief, at a time when so many powerful social movements were stirring up the masses. Today's pseudo-rebels are well aware of this, thanks to hearsay or a few books, and believe that it remains true for eternity. They refuse to recognize the real praxis of their time; it is too sad for their cold hopes. The state notes this fact, and plays on it.

When almost every aspect of international political life and ever more important aspects of internal politics are conducted and displayed in the style of the secret services, with decoys, disinformation and double explanations (one may conceal another, or may only seem to), the spectacle confines itself to revealing a wearisome world of necessary incomprehensibility. This tedious series of lifeless, inconclusive crime novels has all the dramatic interest of a realistically staged fight between blacks, at night, in a tunnel.

When television has shown a fine picture and explained it with a brazen lie, idiots believe that everything is clear. The demi-elite is content to know that almost everything is obscure, ambivalent, 'constructed' by unknown codes. A more exclusive elite would like to know what is true, hard as it is to distinguish in each particular case, despite all their access to special knowledge and confidences. Which is why they would like to get to know the method of truth, though their love usually remains unrequited.

## **XXI.**

Secrecy dominates this world, and first and foremost as the secret of domination. According to the spectacle, secrecy would only be a necessary exception to the rule of freely available, abundant information, just as domination in the integrated spectacle's 'free world' would be restricted to a mere executive body in the service of democracy. But no one really believes the spectacle. How then do spectators accept the existence of secrecy which alone rules out any chance of their running a world of whose principal realities they know nothing, in the unlikely event that they were to be asked how to set about it? The fact is that almost no one sees secrecy in its inaccessible purity and its functional universality. Everyone accepts that there are inevitably little areas of

secrecy reserved for specialists; as regards things in general, many believe they are in on the secret.

In his *Discours sur la servitude volontaire*, La Boetie showed how a tyrant's power will be considerably reinforced by the concentric circles of individuals who believe, rightly or wrongly, that it is in their interests to support it. In the same way many politicians and media professionals who are flattered not to be suspected of being irresponsible, learn a lot through their connections and confidences. Someone who is happy to be given confidential information is hardly likely to criticize it; nor to notice that in all that is confided to him, the principal part of reality is invariably hidden. Thanks to the benevolent protection of his deceivers, he sees a few more of the cards, false though they may be; he never learns the rules of the game. Thus he immediately identifies with the manipulators and scorns an ignorance which in fact he shares. For the tidbits of information tossed to the familiars of a lying tyranny are usually poisoned with lies, manipulated and uncheckable. Yet they gratify those who get them, for they feel themselves superior to those who know nothing. Their only role is to make domination more respectable, never to make it comprehensible. They are the privilege of front-row spectators who are stupid enough to believe they can understand something,



not by making use of what is hidden from them, but by believing what is revealed!

Domination has at least sufficient lucidity to expect that its free and unhindered reign will very shortly lead to a significant number of major catastrophes, both ecological (chemical, for example) and economic (in banking, for example). It has for some time been ensuring it is in a position to deal with these exceptional misfortunes by other means than its usual gentle use of disinformation.

## **XXII.**

As to the rising number of assassinations over the last two decades (Kennedy, Aldo Moro, Olaf Palme, ministers and bankers, a pope or two, some others who were worth more than all of them) which have remained completely unsolved -- for, while the odd supernumerary has been sacrificed, there has never been any question of apprehending those who hold the purse strings -- their serial character shows a common hallmark: the blatant, and variable, lies of official statements. The syndrome of this newly established social disease has quickly spread, as if, following the first documented cases, it moved down from the summits of the state (the traditional sphere for such crimes) and at the same time moved up from the lower depths, the other

traditional locale for trafficking and protection rackets, where this kind of war has always gone on, between professionals. These activities tend to meet up in the middle of social affairs, a place which the state was prepared to frequent and which the Mafia was pleased to reach; thus a kind of confluence begins.

There has been no shortage of attempts to explain these new mysteries in terms of accidents: police incompetence, stupid magistrates, untimely press revelations, crisis of growth in the secret services, malevolent witnesses, or police spies suddenly deciding to go on strike. But Edgar Allan Poe had already discovered the real path to truth, in a well-known argument in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue': "It appears to me that this mystery is considered insoluble, for the very reason which should cause it to be regarded as easy of solution -- I mean for the outre character of its features.... In investigations such as we are now pursuing, it should not be so much asked 'what has occurred,' as 'what has occurred that has never occurred before.'"

### **XXIII**

In January 1988 the Colombian drug Mafia issued a Communique aimed at correcting public opinion about its supposed existence. Now the first requirement of any Mafia,

wherever it may be, is naturally to prove that it does not exist, or that it has been the victim of unscientific calumnies; and that is the first thing it has in common with capitalism. But in these particular circumstances, this Mafia was so irritated at being the only one placed under the spotlight that it went so far as to give details of the other groupings who were trying to cover themselves by illegitimately using it as a scapegoat. It declared: 'We ourselves don't belong to the Mafia of politicians and bureaucrats, bankers, financiers or millionaires, nor to the Mafia of fraudulent contracts, monopolies or oil, nor to the media Mafia.'

We can doubtless assume that the authors of this statement have, like all the rest, an interest in diverting their own activities into that vast river of troubled water whose course irrigates the whole of present society, a river of crime and more banal illegalities. But it is also correct to assume that here we have people who by their very profession know better than most what they are talking about. The Mafia flourishes in the soil of contemporary society. Its expansion is as rapid as that of all the other products of the labor by which integrated spectacular society shapes its world. The Mafia grows along with the swift development of information technology and industrial food processing, along with urban

redevelopment and shanty-towns, secret services and illiteracy.

#### **XXIV.**

When it was first brought to the United States by migrant Sicilian workers, the Mafia was nothing but an uprooted archaism; just like the gang wars between Chinese secret societies which appeared at the same time on the West Coast. Born out of obscurantism and poverty, the Mafia at that time was not even able to put down roots in Northern Italy. It seemed condemned to vanish with the progress of the modern state. For it was a form of organized crime which could only prosper through the 'protection' of backward minorities, outside the urban world, where the laws of the bourgeoisie and a rational police force could not penetrate. In its defense, the Mafia could only eliminate witnesses, to neutralize the police and judiciary, and to maintain necessary secrecy in its sphere of activity. But subsequently it found fresh scope in the new obscurantism first of diffuse spectacular society, then of its integrated form: with the total victory of secrecy, the general resignation of the populace, the complete loss of logic, the universal progress of venality and cowardice, all the conditions were in place for it to become a modern, and offensive, power.

Prohibition in America (one of the finest examples this century of the state's pretension to be able to exercise authoritarian control over everything, and of the results which ensue) handed over the trade in alcohol to organized crime for more than a decade. From there the Mafia, with its new wealth and experience, moved into electoral politics, commerce, the development of the market in professional killers, and certain aspects of international politics. During the Second World War it received favors from the US government, to help with the invasion of Sicily. Legalized alcohol was replaced by drugs, now the leading commodity in illegal consumption. Next the Mafia became closely involved in property dealing, in banking and in high-level politics and affairs of state, and then in the spectacular industries: television, films and publishing. And already, in the United States at least, it is involved in the music industry, as in every other activity where promotion depends on a relatively concentrated group of people. It is easy to apply pressure to them, with bribes and intimidation, since there is no shortage of capital or of untouchable, anonymous hitmen. By corrupting the disc-jockeys, one can choose what will succeed, from equally wretched commodities.

But it is undoubtedly in Italy that the Mafia has acquired the greatest strength, in the wake of its experience and conquests in

America. Since the period of its historic compromise with the parallel government, it has been able to kill magistrates and police chiefs with impunity -- a practice it inaugurated through its participation in the displays of political 'terrorism.' The similar evolution of the Mafia's Japanese equivalent, in relatively independent conditions, well illustrates the unity of the epoch.

It is always a mistake to try to explain something by opposing Mafia and state: they are never rivals. Theory easily verifies what all the rumors in practical life have all too easily shown. The Mafia is not an outsider in this world; it is perfectly at home. Indeed, in the integrated spectacle it stands as the model of all advanced commercial enterprises.

## **XXV.**

With the new conditions which now predominate in a society crushed under the spectacle's iron heel, we know, for example, that a political assassination can be presented in another light, can in a sense be screened. Everywhere the mad are more numerous than before, but what is infinitely more useful is that they can be talked about madly. And it is not some kind of reign of terror which forces such explanations on the media. On the contrary, it is the peaceful

existence of such explanations which should cause terror.

When in 1914, with war on the horizon, Villain assassinated Jaures, no one doubted that Villain, though certainly a somewhat unbalanced man, had believed he had to kill Jaures, because in the eyes of the extremists of the patriotic right who had deeply influenced him, Jaures seemed certain to have a detrimental effect on the country's defense. These extremists had merely underestimated the tremendous strength of patriotic commitment within the Socialist Party, which would immediately lead them into the union sacree, whether or not Jaures was assassinated or allowed to hold to his internationalist position in rejecting war. If such an event happened today, journalists/police and pundits on 'social issues' and 'terrorism' would quickly explain that Villain was well known for having planned several attempted murders, whose intended victims were always men who, despite the variety of their political opinions, all by chance looked and dressed rather like Jaures. Psychiatrists would confirm this, and the media, merely confirming in their turn what the psychiatrists had said, would thus confirm their own competence and impartiality as uniquely authoritative experts. The official police investigation would immediately come up with several reputable people ready to bear witness to the fact that this same Villain, considering

he had been rudely served at the 'Chope du Croissant,' had in their presence loudly threatened to take revenge on its proprietor by publicly murdering on the premises one of his best customers.

This is not to say that, in the past, truth was revealed often or quickly, for Villain was eventually acquitted by the French courts. He was not shot until 1936, at the start of the Spanish revolution, having been imprudent enough to move to the Balearic Islands.

## **XXVI.**

The ubiquitous growth of secret societies and networks of influence answers the imperative demand of the new conditions for profitable management of economic affairs, at a time when the state holds a hegemonic role in the direction of production and when demand for all commodities depends strictly on the centralization achieved by spectacular information/promotion, to which forms of distribution must also adapt. It is therefore only a natural product of the concentration of capital, production and distribution. Whatever does not grow must disappear; and no business can grow without adopting the values, techniques and methods of today's industry, spectacle and state. In the final analysis, it is the particular form of development chosen by the economy



of our epoch which dictates the widespread creation of new personal bonds of dependency and protection.

It is precisely here that we can see the profound truth of the Sicilian Mafia's maxim, so well appreciated throughout Italy: "When you've got money and friends, you can laugh at the law." In the integrated spectacle, the laws are asleep; because they were not made for the new production techniques, and because they are evaded in distribution by new types of agreement. What the public thinks, or prefers, is of no importance. This is what is hidden by the spectacle of all these opinion polls, elections, modernizing restructurings. No matter who the winners are, the faithful customers will get the worst of it, because that is exactly what has been produced for them.

The widespread talk of a 'legal state' only dates from the moment when the modern, so-called democratic state generally ceased to be one. The fact that the expression was only popularized shortly after 1970 and, appropriately, in Italy is far from accidental. In many fields, laws are even made precisely so that they may be evaded, by those who have the means to do so. Illegality in some circumstances -- for example, around the world trade in all sorts of weaponry, especially the most technologically sophisticated products -- is simply a kind of back-up for the economic operation, which

will be all the more profitable because of it. Today many business deals are necessarily as dishonest as the century, and not like those once made within a strictly limited range by people who had chosen the paths of dishonesty.

With the growth of promotion/control networks to mark out and maintain exploitable sectors of the market, there is also an increase in the number of personal services which must be provided to those in the know, who have willingly provided their help; and these are not always the police or guardians of the state's interests and security. Functional complicities operate across time and distance, for their networks command all the means to impose those sentiments of gratitude and fidelity which were unfortunately so rare in the free activity of the bourgeois epoch.

One always learns something from one's adversary. We should not doubt that statesmen, too, came to read the young Lukacs' remarks on the concepts of legality and illegality, at the time when they had to deal with the brief passage of a new generation of negativity -- as Homer said, "Men in their generations are like the leaves of the trees." Since then statesmen, like us, have ceased to trouble themselves with any kind of ideology on the question; and indeed the practices of spectacular society no longer encourage ideological illusions of this

kind. And, finally, it could be said of all of us that what has stopped us from devoting ourselves to one particular illegal activity is the fact that we have had several.

## XXVII.

In book VIII, chapter 5 of *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides wrote something about the operations of another oligarchic conspiracy which closely relates to the situation in which we find ourselves: "Nevertheless the Assembly and the Council chosen by lot still continued to hold meetings. However, they took no decisions that were not approved by the party of the revolution; in fact all the speakers were from this party, and what they were going to say had been considered by the party beforehand. People were afraid when they saw their numbers, and no one now dared to speak in opposition to them. If anyone did venture to do so, some appropriate method was soon found for having him killed, and no one tried to investigate such crimes or take action against those suspected of them. Instead the people kept quiet, and were in such a state of terror that they thought themselves lucky enough to be left unmolested even if they had said nothing at all. They imagined that the revolutionary party was much bigger than it really was, and they lost all confidence in themselves, being unable to find out the facts because of the size of the

city and because they had insufficient knowledge of each other. For the same reason it was impossible for anyone who felt himself ill-treated to complain of it to someone else so as to take measures in his own defense; he would either have had to speak to someone he did not know or to someone he knew but could not rely upon. Throughout the democratic party, people approached each other suspiciously, everyone thinking that the next man had something to do with what was going on. And there were in fact among the revolutionaries some people whom no one could ever have imagined would have joined in an oligarchy. It was these who were mainly responsible for making the general mass of people so mistrustful of each other and who were of the greatest help in keeping the minority safe, since they made mutual suspicion an established thing in the popular assemblies."

If history should return to us after this eclipse, something which depends on factors still in play and thus on an outcome which no one can definitely exclude, these *Comments* may one day serve in the writing of a history of the spectacle; without any doubt the most important event to have occurred this century, and the one for which the fewest explanations have been ventured. In other circumstances, I think I could have considered myself altogether satisfied with my first work on this subject, and left others

to consider future developments. But in the present situation, it seemed unlikely that anyone else would do it.

## **XXVIII.**

Networks of promotion/control slide imperceptibly into networks of surveillance/disinformation. Formerly one only conspired against an established order. Today, conspiring in its favor is a new and flourishing profession. Under spectacular domination, people conspire to maintain it, and to guarantee what it alone would call its well-being. This conspiracy is a part of its very functioning.

Provisions for a kind of preventive civil war are already being made, adapted to variously calculated future projections. These are the 'special squads' responsible for local interventions according to the needs of the integrated spectacle. Thus, for the worst scenarios, a tactic has been planned under the name 'Three Cultures,' a witty reference to a square in Mexico City in October 1968 -- though this time the gloves would be off and the tactic applied before the revolt occurred. [13] Such extreme cases apart, to be a useful tool of government, unexplained assassinations need only be widely influential or relatively frequent, because simply knowing that they are possible complicates calculations in

many different fields. Nor is there any need to be intelligently selective, *ad hominem*. The entirely random application of the procedure may well be more productive.

The composition of certain fragments of a social critique of rearing has also been arranged, something which is no longer entrusted to academics or media professionals, whom it is now preferable to keep apart from excessively traditional lies in this debate: a new critique is required, advanced and exploited in a new way, controlled by another, better trained, sort of professional. In a relatively confidential manner, lucid texts are beginning to appear, anonymously, or signed by unknown authors -- a tactic helped by everyone's concentration on the clowns of the spectacle, which in turn makes unknowns justly seem the most admirable -- texts not only on subjects never touched on in the spectacle but also containing arguments whose force is made more striking by a calculable originality deriving from the fact that however evident, they are never used. This practice may serve as at least a first stage in initiation to recruit more alert intellects, who will later be told more about the possible consequences, should they seem suitable. What for some will be the first step in a career will be for others with lower grades, the first step into the trap prepared for them.

In some cases, with issues that threaten to become controversial, another pseudo-critique can be created; and between the two opinions which will thus be put forward -- both outside the impoverished conventions of the spectacle -- unsophisticated judgment can oscillate indefinitely, while discussion around them can be renewed whenever necessary. Most often this concerns a general discussion of what is hidden by the media, and this discussion can be strongly critical, and on some points quite evidently intelligent, yet always curiously decentered. Topics and words have been artificially chosen, with the aid of computers programmed in critical thought. These texts always contain certain gaps, which are quite hard to spot but nonetheless remarkable: the vanishing point of perspective is always abnormally absent. They resemble those facsimiles of famous weapons, which only lack the firing-pin. This is inevitably a lateral critique, which perceives many things with considerable candor and accuracy, but places itself to one side. Not because it affects some sort of impartiality, for on the contrary it must seem to find much fault, yet without ever apparently feeling the need to reveal its cause, to state, even implicitly, where it is coming from and where it wants to go.

To this kind of counter-journalistic false critique can be added the organized practice of rumor which we know to be originally a

sort of uncontrollable by-product of spectacular information, since everyone, however vaguely, perceives something misleading about the latter and trust it as little as it deserves. Rumor began as something superstitious, naive, self-deluding. More recently, however, surveillance has begun introducing into the population people capable of starting rumors which suit it at the very first signal. It has been decided here to apply in practice the observations of a theory formulated some thirty years ago, whose origins lie in American sociology of advertising -- the theory of individuals known as 'pacemakers,' that is, those whom others in their milieu come to follow and imitate -- but this time moving from spontaneity to control. Budgetary, or extrabudgetary, means have also been released to fund numerous auxiliaries; beside the former specialists of the recent past, academics and media professionals, sociologists and police. To believe in the continuing mechanical application of past models leads to just as many errors as the general ignorance of the past. "Rome is no longer in Rome," and the Mafia are no longer thieves. [14] And the surveillance and disinformation services are as far removed from the police and informers of former times -- for example, from the roussins and mouchards of the Second Empire -- as the present special services in all countries are from the officers



of the army general staff's Deuxieme Bureau in 1914.

Since art is dead, it has evidently become extremely easy to disguise police as artists. When the latest imitations of a recuperated neo-dadaism are allowed to pontificate proudly in the media, and thus also to tinker with the decor of official palaces, like court Jesters to the kings of junk, it is evident that by the same process a cultural cover is guaranteed for every agent or auxiliary of the state's networks of persuasion. Empty pseudo-museums, or pseudo-research centers on the work of nonexistent personalities, can be opened just as fast as reputations are made for journalist-cops, historian-cops, or novelist-cops. No doubt Arthur Cravan foresaw this world when he wrote in *Maintenant*: "Soon we will only see artists in the streets, and it will take no end of effort to find a single man." This is indeed the sense of the revived form of an old quip of Parisian loafers: "Hello there artists! Too bad if I've got it wrong." [15]

Things having become what they are, we can now witness the use of collective authorship by the most modern publishing houses, that is to say, the ones with the best commercial distribution. Since their pseudonyms are only authenticated by the newspapers, they can swap them around, collaborate, replace each other, take on new artificial brains. Their task is to express the ideas and

lifestyles of the epoch, not because of their personalities, but because they are ordered to. Those who believe that they are truly independent, individual literary entrepreneurs can knowingly vouch for the fact that Ducasse has had a row with the Comte de Lautreamont, [16] that Dumas isn't Maquet, that we must never confuse Erckmann with Chatrian; that Censier and Daubenton are no longer on speaking terms. It might be best to say that this type of modern author was a follower of Rimbaud, at least in so far as "I is someone else."

The whole history of spectacular society called for the secret services to play the pivotal role; for it is in them that the features and force of such a society are concentrated to the highest degree. Moreover they are always also the arbiters of that society's general interests, despite their modest title of 'services.' There is no corruption here, for they faithfully express the common morals of the spectacular century. Thus do watchers and watched sail forth on a boundless ocean. The spectacle has brought the secret to victory, and must be more and more controlled by specialists in secrecy who are certainly not only officials who have to different degrees managed to free themselves from state control; who are not only officials.

## XXIX.

A general working rule of the integrated spectacle, at least for those who manage its affairs, is that, in this framework, everything which can be done, must be done. This means that every new instrument must be employed, whatever the cost. New machinery everywhere becomes the goal and the driving force of the system, and is the only thing which can significantly modify its progress, every time its use is imposed without further reflection. Society's owners indeed want above all to keep a certain 'social relation between people,' but they must also maintain continual technological innovation; for that was one of the obligations that came with their inheritance. This law must also thus apply to the services which safeguard domination. When an instrument has been perfected, it *must be* used, and its use will reinforce the very conditions that favor this use. Thus it is that emergency procedures become standard.

In a certain sense, the coherence of spectacular society proves revolutionaries right, since it is evident that one cannot reform the most trifling detail without taking the whole thing apart. But at the same time this coherence has eliminated every organized revolutionary tendency by eliminating those social terrains where it had more or less effectively been able to find expression: from trade unions to

newspapers, towns to books. In a single movement, it has been possible to illuminate the incompetence and thoughtlessness of which this tendency was quite naturally the bearer. And on an individual level, the reigning coherence is quite capable of eliminating, or buying off such exceptions as may arise.

### **XXX.**

Surveillance would be much more dangerous had it not been led by its ambition for absolute control of everything to a point where it encountered difficulties created by its own progress. There is a contradiction between the mass of information collected on a growing number of individuals, and the time and intelligence available to analyze it, not to mention its actual interest. The quantity of data demands constant summarizing: much of it will be lost, and what remains is still too long to be read. Management of surveillance and manipulation is uncoordinated. Indeed there is a widespread struggle for a share of the profits, and thus also for favoring the development of this or that potential in the existing society, to the detriment of the other potentials, which nonetheless, so long as they are all tarred with the same brush, are considered equally respectable.

This struggle is also a game. Each controller comes to over-value his agents, as well as his opponents. Each country, not to mention the numerous supranational alliances, currently possesses an indefinite number of police and counter-espionage services, along with secret services, both state and para-state. There are also many private companies dealing in surveillance, security and investigation. The large multinationals naturally have their own services; but so do nationalized companies, even those of modest scale, which will still pursue independent policies at a national and sometimes an international level. A nuclear power group will fight against an oil group, even though both are owned by the same state and what is more are dialectically united by their interest in maintaining high oil prices on the world market. Each particular industry's security service combats the threat of sabotage, while organizing it, when necessary, against their rivals: a company with important interests in undersea tunnels will be favorably disposed to the hazards of ferries and may bribe newspapers in financial trouble to ensure they spot these hazards without delay and without too much reflection; a company competing with Sandoz will be indifferent to underground springs in the Rhine valley. Secrets are subject to secret surveillance. Thus each of these organizations, all subtly united around the executives of *raison d'etat*, aspires to its own private hegemony

of meaning. For meaning has been lost along with an identifiable center.

Going from success to success, until 1968 modern society was convinced it was loved. It has since had to abandon these dreams; it prefers to be feared. It knows full well that "its innocent air has gone forever." [17]

So it is that thousands of plots in favor of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere, as the overlap of secret networks and secret issues or activities grows ever more dense along with their rapid integration into every sector of economics, politics and culture. In all areas of social life, the degree of intermingling in surveillance, disinformation and security activities gets greater and greater. The plot having thickened to the point where it is almost out in the open, each part of it now starts to interfere with, or worry, the others, for all these professional conspirators are spying on each other without really knowing why, are colliding by chance yet not identifying each other with any certainty. Who is observing whom? On whose behalf, apparently? And actually? The real influences remain hidden, and the ultimate aims can barely be suspected and almost never understood. So that while no one can be sure he is not being tricked or manipulated, it is rare for the string-puller to know he has succeeded. And in any case, to be on the winning side of manipulation

does not mean that one has chosen the right strategic perspective. Tactical successes can thus lead great powers down dangerous roads.

In the same network and apparently pursuing similar goals, those who are only a part of the network are necessarily ignorant of the hypotheses and conclusions of the other parts, and above all of their controlling nucleus. The reasonably well known fact that all information on whatever subject under observation may well be entirely imaginary, or seriously falsified, or very inadequately interpreted, complicates and undermines to a great degree the calculations of the inquisitors. For what is sufficient to condemn someone is far less sure when it comes to recognizing or using him. Since sources of information are in competition, so are falsifications.

It is in these circumstances that we can speak of domination's falling rate of profit, as it spreads to almost the whole of social space and consequently increases both its personnel and its means. For now, each means aspires and labors to become an end. Surveillance spies on and plots against itself.

Its principal present contradiction, finally, is that it is spying on, infiltrating and pressurizing an absent entity: that which is supposed to be trying to subvert the social order. But where can it [subversion] actually

be seen at work? Certainly conditions have never been so seriously revolutionary, but it is only governments who think so. Negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed long ago. Because of this, it remains only a vague, yet highly disturbing threat, and surveillance in its turn has been deprived of its preferred field of activity. Surveillance and intervention are thus rightly led by the present exigencies, which determine their terms of engagement, to operate on the very terrain of this threat in order to combat it in advance. This is why surveillance has an interest in organizing poles of negation itself, which it can instruct with more than the discredited means of the spectacle, so as to manipulate, not terrorists this time, but theories.

### **XXXI.**

Baltasar Gracian, that great authority on historical time, tells us with considerable pertinency in *The Courtier*: "Be it words or action, all must be measured by time. We must choose when we are able; for time and tide wait on no man." But Omar Khayyam was less of an optimist. "We are the puppets and the firmament is the puppet-master, /In actual fact and not as a metaphor, /For a time we acted on this stage, /We went back one by one into the box of oblivion."



## XXXII.

The French Revolution brought great changes in the art of war. It was from that experience that Clausewitz could draw the distinction between tactics, as the use of forces in battle to obtain victory, and strategy, as the use of victories in battle to attain the goals of a war. Europe was subjugated, quickly and lastingly, by the results. But the theory was not proven till later, and was developed unevenly. First to be appreciated were the positive features directly brought about by a profound social transformation: the enthusiasm and mobility of a greatly enlarged army which lived off the land and was relatively independent of stores and supply trains. Such useful elements were soon counterbalanced by the appearance on the enemy side of similar elements: in Spain, the French armies encountered an equal popular enthusiasm; in the vast spaces of Russia, a land they could not live off; after the rising in Germany, numerically far superior forces. However, the effect of a total break in the new French tactics, which was the simple basis on which Bonaparte founded his strategy -- the latter consisting of using victories in advance, as if acquired on credit; to understand maneuvers in all their diverse variants from the start as consequences of a victory which while not yet obtained -- would certainly be at the first onslaught derived

also from the forced abandonment of false ideas.

The new tactics demanded an abrupt break from false ideas, and at the same time, by the concomitant play of the other innovations outlined above, found the means to achieve such a break. The newly mustered French soldiers were incapable of fighting in line, that is, of keeping ranks and firing on command. They would thus be deployed in extended order, firing at will as they advanced on the enemy. Now in fact independent fire was shown to be the only effective kind, a genuinely destructive use of musketry which proved the most decisive factor in military engagements of the period. Yet military thinking had universally rejected this conclusion in the century that was ending, and indeed debate on the issue continued through most of the new century, despite constant practical demonstration in battle, and the ceaseless progress in range and rate of fire.

Similarly, the establishment of spectacular domination is such a profound social transformation that it has radically altered the art of government. This simplification, which has quickly borne such fruit in practice, has yet to be fully comprehended in theory. Old prejudices everywhere belied, precautions now useless, and even the residues of scruples from an earlier age, still clog up the thinking of quite a number of

rulers, preventing them from recognizing something which practice demonstrates and proves [to be true] every single day. Not only are the subjected led to believe that to all intents and purposes they are still living in a world which in fact has been eliminated, but the rulers themselves sometimes suffer from the absurd belief that in some respects they do too. They come to believe in a part of what they have suppressed, as if it remained a reality and had still to be included in their calculations. This backwardness will not last long. Those who have achieved so much so easily must necessarily go further. It should not be thought that those who have been too slow to appreciate the pliability of the new rules of their game and its form of barbaric grandeur, will last forever like some archaism in proximity to real power. It is certainly not the spectacle's destiny to end up as enlightened despotism.

We must conclude that a changeover is imminent and ineluctable in the co-opted cast who serve the interests of domination, and above all manage the protection of that domination. In such an affair, innovation will surely not be displayed on the spectacle's stage. It appears instead like lightning, which we know only when it strikes. This changeover, which will conclude decisively the work of these spectacular times, will occur discreetly, and conspiratorially, even though it concerns those within the inner

circles of power. It will select those who will share the central exigency that they clearly see what obstacles they have overcome, and of what they are capable.

### **XXXIII.**

The same Sardou also wrote:

Vainly relates to the subject, in vain to the object, uselessly simply means with no use for anyone. One has worked vainly when one has done so without success, so that one has wasted one's time and effort; one has worked in vain when one has done so without achieving the intended result, because of the defectiveness of the work. If I cannot succeed in completing a piece of work, I am working vainly, I am uselessly wasting my time and effort. If the work I have done does not have the result I was expecting, if I have not attained my goal, I have worked in vain; that is to say, I have done something useless.... It is also said that someone has worked vainly when he has not been rewarded for his work, or when this work has not been approved; for in this case the

worker has wasted his time and effort, without this prejudicing in any way the value of his work, which indeed may be very good.

-- Guy Debord, Paris, February-April 1988.

Translator's note: I would like to thank Guy Debord, Liz Heron and Martin Thom for their help with this translation. The French edition of *Comments* has no footnotes, and it would have been inappropriate to add any to this translation. However, with the author's approval, I have included these brief notes on certain references and allusions that might otherwise remain unnecessarily obscure to English readers.

1. Sun Tzu: Guy Debord's epigraph is taken from the first European translation of *The Art of War*, by the Jesuit JJ.L. Amiot (1782). The best available English translation, by Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford 1963), does not include this passage, so I have had to translate from the French.

2. "wine experts able to con connoisseurs into admiring their new, more distinctive, flavors." The French here is "des experts en vins qui entra'neront les caves a aimer leurs nouveaux parfums, plus reconnaissables."

Debord's pun on the two meanings of caves -- wine-cellars (fem.) and hopeless dupes or suckers (masc.) -- is unfortunately lost in English. The word's underworld etymology is instructive. It originally referred to anyone who worked in a legitimate job; hence to someone who did not know how to live; and hence to any kind of dupe.

3. "under a poor cloak you commonly find a good drinker." The proverb is from Don Quixote, quoted by the Duchess in her conversation with Sancho Panza (vol. II, book 3, ch. 1). The Spanish is, "Debajo de mala capa, suele haber buen bebedor." I have used the Samuel Pumam translation.

4. "men resemble their times more than their fathers." An Arab proverb, dating from the fourteenth century.

5. "They are jeering at us, and we know whom these programmes are for." The French here is, "On nous siffle, et l'on sait pour qui sont ces structures." Debord is playing on a famous line from Racine's *Andromache*, Act V, Scene 3: "Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur vos tetes?"

6. Dr. Archambeau. In 1984, seemingly motivated by professional jealousy, certain colleagues of a Dr. Archambeau at a hospital in Poitiers caused the death of some of his patients in the operating-theater by reversing the oxygen and nitrogen supplies

during resuscitation. Archambeau was eventually acquitted of any blame, but the real culprits were never discovered.

7. It was Marx who defined political economy as "the final denial of humanity."

8. "illusionists, barkers and stool-pigeons." The French here is "illusionnistes, aboyeurs et barons." Baron, a word still in common use, refers to a trickster's accomplice, planted in the crowd, who helps to dupe others either by raising objections which the trickster can easily refute, or by pretending to buy whatever is on offer. This was also the nineteenth-century meaning of "stool-pigeon," although the word is now used in a different sense. I cannot find a modern English equivalent, though some American meanings of "stooge" might be adequate.

9. "rather in the way that the one who was waiting for Grouchy instead saw Blucher join the battle, it was simply a matter of calling in the Guard of experts." The battle is Waterloo, the "one," Napoleon. The allusion is to Victor Hugo's description of Waterloo in his poem "L'Expiation": seeing the battle was going badly for the French, Napoleon summoned the Imperial Guard to enter the fray.

10. "GAL." Grupo Anti-Terrorista de Liberacion.

11. "the mad killers of Brabant." *Les tueurs fous de Brabant* was the media's name for the perpetrators of a series of murders in Belgium in the 1980s. The murders were carried out during a number of raids on supermarkets: on each occasion the gang, armed with military weapons, shot six or seven people, apparently at random, and stole very small amounts of money. Recent newspaper revelations have suggested that the choice of victims may not have been entirely random, and that the murderers may have been linked to right-wing organizations.

12. "home is the pirate, home from the sea." The allusion is to Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem." But some of the references here are more specific. Debord has pointed out that "the thief who no longer needs to steal," for example, was Francois Besse, the former accomplice of Jacques Mesrine, who has disappeared without trace (now the Cafe Chope du Croissant), 146 rue Montmartre, on 31, July 1914.

13. "under the name 'Three Cultures'." On 2 October 1968, police opened fire on student demonstrators in Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City, killing many. During the preceding fortnight, at least fifty more students had been killed during police attacks on strike meetings and the university campus.



14. *"Rome is no longer in Rome." The quotation is from a line in Racine's Mithridate: "Rome n'est plus dans Rome; elle est toute ou je suis."*

15. *"Hello there, artists." The French is, "Salut, les artistes! Tant pis si je me trompes." The old low-life greeting was, "Salut, les hommes." Debord has substituted "artists" for "men."*

16. *"Ducasse has had a row with the Comte de Lautreamont." Isidor Ducasse was of course the Comte de Lautreamont. Auguste Macquet (or Maquet), a historian, was one of Dumas Pere's chief literary collaborators. Emile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian (1822-99 and 1826-90) wrote several novels and plays together over some forty years, many of them set in their native Alsace. Censier-Daubenton is a Paris Metro station.*

17. *"It's innocent air has gone forever." Debord is quoting from his [1978] film, In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni.*

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